RED MESAS

*

G. MARSHALL

A Wild West Story



PUBLISHED BY COLLINS

Adventure in the West

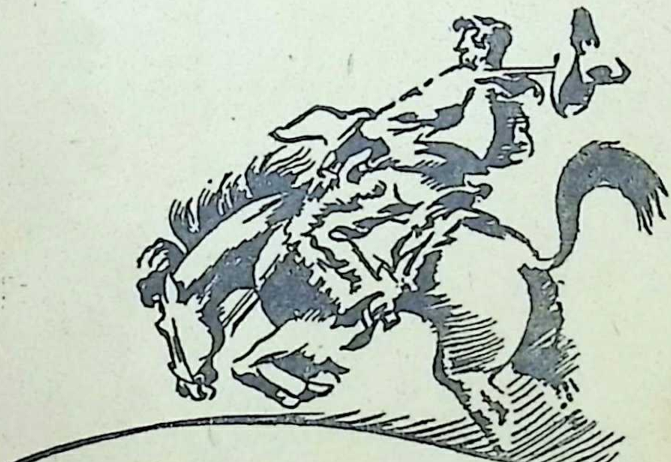
PONDEROSA was no better than any other town on the frontier—a lawless place where cowboys and lumberjacks met to spend their pay packets. Night in Ponderosa was often noisy with gunfire, a hot spot where sheriffs were apt to die with their boots on. It didn't look too healthy for the new sheriff, young Bob Gill, when he took over. But at that time Ponderosa was madly excited at another change, the sale of the Bar B Bar Ranch in the red mesas region, and all agog to set eyes on the new owner. It certainly looked as if Ponderosa was going to see some exciting days and nights, and of course Bob was in the thick of it. Gary Marshall's story is a grand one, packed with excitement and entertainment.

PRICE IN INDIA
FOURTEEN ANNAS



RED MESAS

GARY MARSHALL



WILD WEST CLUB

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CHAPTER I

Blethroad arrived in Ponderosa less than a week after the November elections. Drawing up before the hotel, he scrambled out of the buckboard and began to lift valises and other pieces of worn and soiled luggage to the walk.

"Hallo, Buck," said Owens, the keeper of the hotel. "Looks like you're goin' to leave the country."

Buck Blethroad was a wiry, grizzled man of sixty with aquiline features and cold blue eyes. He drew down his thick brows now.

"Well, what if I am leavin' this country ?" he challenged. "I don't owe nobody a cent, do I ?"

"You don't owe me anything," smiled Owens.

"And I ain't goin' to owe you nothin' I can't pay !" growled the rancher, a man who had a not very savoury reputation in Ponderosa. He flung more luggage from the buckboard.

"It's reported you sold your ranch, Buck," ventured Owens.

Blethroad did not reply until he had finished unloading. Then he wolfed off a chew of tobacco before he growled :

"Yeah, I sold out ! And I got damned good money for my spread, if that'll do you any good, Owens !"

"Glad to learn it, Buck," said the affable hotel man. "You had a good ranch even if it was a long way from here."

Blethroad glared and grunted that he didn't suppose cattle could be raised on a large scale right here in the streets.

"I wonder," mused Owens, "what the trouble with you is right now."

"Trouble ?" snorted the rancher. "I ain't got no trouble ! I got plenty money though !"

Owens suggested that they go to the bar.

"Not till I find some feller to take keer of this stuff," Blethroad objected. "I want 'er all took to the train, west-bound. I'm movin' down to the coast to live like a white man."

Owens said he would have the luggage taken to the train, which was not due to arrive for several hours.

In the saloon, which was part of the hotel, Blethroad downed two drinks of straight whisky and thawed out a little. He rubbed his lean middle which was covered by a frayed cotton shirt.

"Feel better, feel better, Cal. Trouble with me I was tired. That's a long forty mile out of my old place."

Blethroad's better humour was merely a mask to cover his perplexed and troubled thoughts. He was troubled because now he was out of the Red Mesas country, and per-

plexed as to how he could keep the forty thousand dollars he had got for his ranch and get back the ranch as well.

"I don't believe you'll know what to do with yourself down to the coast," said Owens. "You've raised cattle here for thirty years, Buck."

"Thirty-three years and four months!" Blethroad corrected grimly. "Know what to do with myself? Say, I got dinero enough to pay my own way in any sort of company, and if the folks down at the coast don't cotton to my style then they can go clean to hell, Owens!"

"Have another," the bartender offered, making a smile and wishing he had a ranch to sell.

"Don't care if I do," grunted Blethroad. "Make mine straight again."

The third drink mellowed him to where he did not feel wronged because he had traded his ranch for a comfortable fortune in cash. He even chuckled a little.

"Durned if I don't wish her all the luck in the world," he muttered. "And durned if I don't think she'll need it."

Owens said he had heard Blethroad's buyer was a woman.

"Yep!" the old rancher chuckled. "Sold out horn, hide and tail to a rich gal from back East. Sure do wish her luck, too!"

"Rich girl from the East, eh?" ventured Sid Peltier, the bartender.

"Yep! Ain't seen 'er though. Deal was made through a agent back in Santa Fe."

"When's she coming out to take possession?" Owens inquired.

"Don't know," Blethroad snorted. "Don't care. Got my money. It was paid to me by that Santa Fe slicker who makes me pay him a commission, durn him! I don't care if she never shows up to take possession. I left Jake Prentiss out there to run the spread till she shows up. Won't make no difference to me if Jake he decided to sell the cattle for himself. I washed my hands of the whole business."

When it was suggested that they take a fourth drink Blethroad grasped the edge of the bar. His slitted eyes filled with suspicion.

"Say, what you tryin' to do? Get me drunk so you can rob me?"

Peltier's face flushed, but he managed to smile.

"I don't want your money," he said. "Fact is, I don't know whether you have any."

"Huh? You don't, eh?" growled Blethroad, remembering the forty thousand dollars in one of the valises on the board walk outside. "Yeah, I'll take another, but no more after that, mind you."

Owens took his third cigar, with the intention of putting it back in the box later so it could be sold again.

" By the way, Buck," he said now, " what's the young lady's name ?"

Blethroad swallowed his whisky, coughed. He furrowed his brow, and the end of his hooked nose drew down over his white, "rat-tail " moustache.

" Lemme see—lemme see now. It's Fieldin' or somethin of that sort. Yeah, Kate Fieldin', that's her !"

" Kate Fielding ?"

" That's what I said ! She signs her letters Miss Kate Fieldin'."

The few loungers in the saloon were interested now. One said :

" What sort of filly is she, Blethroad ?"

" How do I know ? I never seen her ! As I said before, I sold her the spread through one of them slicker agents in Santa Fe."

" Don't you even know how old she is ?" inquired another man.

" Know how old she is ?" snarled Blethroad, his natural meanness increased by the effects of the four drinks. " I never seen her, I tell you, so's I could examine her teeth and find out how old she is !"

Unwilling to remain away from his fortune any longer, Blethroad shuffled out, Owen at his heels. They had no more than gone when interest in Kate Fielding began to grow. Was she old or young or middle-aged ? Dark or light or in-between ?

" Aw, I bet she's one of them there fluffy young things they have back East as has been left a lot of money and don't know what to do with it," chuckled one man.

" Huh ! More likely she's an old-maid spinster, Sam."

" Yeah, that's it !" agreed a third. " Likely she's too old to raise kids so she's taken to raisin' cows."

They all laughed at this attempt at wit.

As he listened to the garrulous and occasionally vulgar talk, Sid Peltier, behind the bar, was trying to picture Kate Fielding. Meanwhile the men in the saloon had got into an argument, the result of which was a general agreement that Kate Fielding, despairing of finding a husband back East, had invested her money here in the wild and desperate hope that it would somehow result in marriage for her.

" That's her !" declared Bill Sanderson. " I'll bet she ain't purty, and ain't a day under fifty, neither. But even so, wimmin, they just nacherally yearn for getting' married, and if they can't accomplish it one place they up and try another."

" Yeah, if they got money enough to look around," qualified Sam Bascom. " And this here damsel we're talkin' about must be plumb rich to up and pay forty thousand cash for a spread she ain't never seen."

" Damsel !" guffawed Pat Andrews. " Bet she's fifty-five if she's a day."

Presently Peltier said he was willing to wager that Miss Kate Fielding was not more than twenty-five. The eyes of the loungers were instantly suspicious.

" Say, you got some tip on her, Sid ?"

" You sure must have got some advance information. What's she look like ?"

" Come on, tell us !" Bascom ordered. " You do it and I'll stand the drinks for the house."

" Huh ! You ain't seen her, have you, Peltier ?"

The bartender, a handsome, affable fellow, laughed.

" Boys, I'm just backing a hunch," he said. " All of you claim she's old and homely. I contend she's young and good-looking."

They were still talking about the new owner of the Red Mesas Ranch when a man entered the saloon from the rear. He was a tall, graceful young fellow. His grey trousers and vest and blue cotton shirt would not have stamped him as a man of importance, but here a silence fell as he advanced towards the bar. Not a man but knew him, and well.

" Howdy, Bob."

" Howdy, Gill. Come take somethin' on us."

Bob Gill smiled and shook his brown head to this and other invitations.

" Say," declared Bascom, " we want to know whether to make a bet with Sid there."

They explained to Gill what they had been arguing about. He smiled, lifted a broad shoulder which automatically hitched up the holstered pistol at his left side.

" Yes," he said, and there was a trace of humour in his voice, " I had heard that a lady had bought out Buck Blethroad."

Out in front, there was no trace of humour in the voice or the face of the man who had sold out. After a quick look at the heap of luggage, Blethroad began to paw it over, flinging valises and parcels this way and that. His lids were narrowed and his eyes seemed to blaze as he whirled and glared at the hotelkeeper.

" Say !" he snarled, and grabbed the worn revolver at his side, " that yaller valise is gone !"

" Yaller valise ?" Owens repeated, and his full reddish face paled with fear and wonder. " I don't know what you mean, Buck !"

" You don't know what I mean ?" Blethroad snarled as he half-drew the old Colt. " I tell you my yaller valise is gone, and that there valise had all the money I got for my ranch in it ! Where is the durned thing ?"

Frightened now, not so much of the hard-bitten rancher as from the fact that theft had been committed in front

of his hotel, Owens protested that he knew nothing about the missing valise. He could not even remember having seen it in particular among the many pieces of ragged, soiled luggage.

Blethroad's face tensed now until his eyes glittered and his naturally thin-lipped mouth was a hard line below the rat-tail moustache.

"You're a liar, Owens!" he snarled. "You're a durned slick, tricky liar! 'Course you didn't steal it yourself 'cause you was inside all the time with me, but you had somebody do it for you! Oh yeah, I see now why you was so durned anxious for me to go in and take a drink with you!"

Calmer for the reason that he saw murder in the slitted eyes, Owens said that the valise would be found.

"Bet your life it'll be found!" Blethroad snarled as he drew the heavy old pistol. "It'll be found inside of three minutes or there'll be a hole in you, Owens, big enough to shove a pick-handle through!"

CHAPTER II

"But man, I don't know anything about your valise!" Owens cried, now ghastly pale. "Take a look for it! Lamme help you look for it!"

"Take a look for it!" Blethroad sneered as he cocked the six-shooter. "You know damned well where it is. You had some thief sneak it inside while I was in the saloon! Oh yeah, I see now why you was so anxious to set up the drinks! You got just ten seconds more to live, Owens, if you don't tell me where that valise is!"

A score of men who had been in the street had stopped or were beginning to walk towards the hotel.

"Look out, Owens!" one man yelled. "That old maverick'll shoot!"

"Bet your life I'll shoot!" Blethroad yelled back though he did not take his fierce eyes from the hotelkeeper. "This slick——had one of my valises stole! It was valuable!"

While the men watched, not daring to interfere lest they hasten murder, Owens continued to protest that he knew nothing about the missing valise.

"I tell you you're a liar!" Blethroad snarled as he poked the end of the six-shooter closer to Owens' middle. "Now you just got five seconds to live if you don't tell me where that valise and my money is, damn you!"

A man across the street was running into the hardware store for a weapon when Bob Gill appeared from the hotel. In one swift glance he saw what was about to occur. Like a flash a six-shooter came into his right hand.

" Hey you, Blethro[illegible] " Stop that !"

Instantly Blethroad's wrath turned upon the newcomer. His pistol turned too.

" Get to hell out of here !" he snarled. " You don't know nothin' about this !"

There was no anger in Bob Gill's blue eyes as they watched. He had what might have been the beginning of a smile on his bronzed face. He ordered quietly :

" Put that gun back into its holster, Blethroad. I don't want to have to shoot you."

" Oh, you don't want to have to shoot me, eh ?" the rancher sneered, but the end of his pistol sagged before the commanding coolness of the younger man's look. " Well, why don't you go ahead and shoot, you durned four-flusher ?"

" Put that gun into its holster," Gill repeated. " If you don't I'll take it away from you and poke it down your ornery throat !"

Where a moment before men, watching, had been sure one gun would roar, they held their breaths now, listening for the noise of two. Then Gill began to move quickly forward.

" All right !" he snapped. " If you want me to ram out some of your teeth with the barrel of that Colt——"

" All right ! All right !" Blethroad roared. " I don't want no trouble with you, Gill !" He was suddenly so eager to put his weapon away that he missed the holster three times with the long barrel before he finally rammed it into the leather sheath.

Men, breathing more easily, were crossing the street, hurrying along it. Owens began to explain, but was cut short by Blethroad, who was still venting most of his rage on Gill.

" Never mind what the trouble was !" the rancher shrilled. " It's none of your durned business ! I suppose you're the sheriff now, Gill !"

" Yes," Bob Gill returned calmly, " I happened to get elected."

" Happened to get elected !" Blethroad snarled. " Say if there'd been a yaller dog runnin' against you, it'd beat you !"

Smouldering hate flamed anew in the old rancher's brain. He had hated Patterson, the sheriff who had been killed in the Red Mesas region under questionable circumstances. Now his hate was transferred to the man who had succeeded that sheriff, to the man who, for the past four years, had been Patterson's chief deputy.

" Say, what's the matter, Buck ?" demanded Marcasson, who had hurried from the big general store across the street. " Maybe it's something I can help you out on."

" You shut your mouth and keep outen this !" Blethroad

ordered. "When I want help I'll ask for it! I never yet asked for help in all the years I been in this country."

Puzzled, but breathing more freely than he had breathed for a minute or two, Owens moved back, a sickly grin on his florid face.

"A hell of a sheriff you'll make!" Blethroad was sneering at Bob Gill now. "You ain't got sense or sand enough to run a rat into a hole and drown it out!"

Gill shrugged and said:

"Best judge that after a year or two, Blethroad."

"After a year or two? I suppose you're goin' to wait for a year or two before you start lookin' for the man as killed Dan Patterson!"

"No, sir," Gill corrected, "I intend to begin looking for him right away."

"Yeah?"

"That's right."

Two pairs of human eyes could hardly have been more unlike, though they were not unlike in colour. Neither wavered, however. In Gill's was what might have been a twinkle of humour or derision. While Blethroad's no longer smouldered, they were probing, and as cold as pale blue ice.

"And I suppose you're goin' to find the man as kills Patterson right off, ain't you?"

"I intend to find the killer," Gill said patiently. "It may not be right away."

It was Owens' stammered explanations to the growing crowd that finally diverted Blethroad's attention. He tensed as he heard his own name mentioned, then snarled:

"Say, I'd forgot all about that there yaller valise! It had all my money in it!"

Now he tried to look self-righteous as he turned again to Gill.

"Seein' as you're the sheriff, and such a durned good one, what becomes of that valise of mine? 'Course I know Owens, he had some thief sneak it inside!"

The hotelman broke from the group to which he had been explaining.

"Look here, Blethroad! That's enough out of you! I don't know where your valise is, and what's more, I don't care! I doubt that you had any!"

"Doubt that I had any?" the former owner of the Bar B Bar growled. "Well, I did, and it was a yaller one! It had the forty thousand dollars I got for my ranch in it, too! The money I got from that filly back East! Oh, you needn't try to be so slick, Owens, I can see through you like you was glass!"

As the hotelman reached out big, flabby hands, Blethroad grabbed the handle of his six-shooter.

“ Don't do that !” Gill said.

“ Don't do that !” Blethroad mimicked in rage and derision. “ I'm tellin' him that while I was inside there he had some feller sneak out and take my valise ! That's why he was so anxious to gimme that free whisky !”

“ Isn't that about the only sort of liquor you drink, Buck ?” asked Hank Larraby, a cowboy who had once ridden for the Bar B Bar outfit.

There were now fully forty men and a few startled women in the crowd. Half of them were telling Blethroad that he must be mistaken about the valise when a tall, stout woman with much force of character upon her face marched from the hotel. She stopped to look over the excitement.

“ Wait a minute !” she ordered. “ Am I correct in hearing that somebody is accusing my husband of theft !”

Blethroad whirled upon her and ordered her to go back where she had come from.

“ Get out of here ! Get out !” he went on. “ There's already too durned many women here and they keep me from usin' the sort of talk these here fools can understand ! Get out !”

The other women and a few of the men cringed, but not Mrs. Owens. Her black eyes flashed. With her large, capable hands reaching, she advanced upon the man who had sold his ranch to the rich woman from the East.

“ Why, you miserable old rat !” she told him in no uncertain tone. “ I'm going to wring your neck for this ! If Ben Owens ain't got the sand to kill you when you accuse him of stealin', I sure have !”

Taking a quick step, Gill placed himself in her path.

“ You get out of my way ! ” she cried. “ Bob Gill, you ain't old enough to be a full-grown sheriff. Get out of my way till I wring that ornery old coyote's neck ! The idea of him accusin' Ben Owens of stealin' ! Ain't I lived with him for twenty-odd years ?”

“ My gosh,” a man back in the crowd muttered, “ I don't see how he lived with you that long, ma'am !”

Gill forcibly moved the woman back a step.

“ You best keep out of this, Henrietta !” Owens called now. “ I'll tend to this matter. Best go back inside, Henrietta !”

“ Back inside ?” she demanded, turning upon him. “ And don't you Henrietta me, Ben Owens ! Not after you let this old codger accuse you of robbin' him without shootin' him !”

Men were now trying to explain that Owens had been the one in danger of being shot.

“ Well, if that's the case,” Mrs. Owens demanded as she fixed fiery black eyes on her spouse, “ why didn't you take his gun away from him and poke it down his throat ? I don't see now why we let the old rat stop at our hotel when he was in town !”

" Well, I always paid for more'n I got at your hotel!" Blethroad snorted.

" Shut up, you lousy old rat! You never lost anything in front of our hotel, and you know it!"

" Never lost anything!" he shrilled, and began to hop impotently from one foot to the other. " Say, I lost a yaller valise, and it had forty thousand dollars in it!"

Mrs. Owens tilted her head to the left, and there was much contempt and sarcasm in her flashing eyes.

" Forty thousand dollars, did you say?"

" Yeah, I said forty thousand! And it was stole from right here while I went in to drink your man's free whisky!" Blethroad paused, looked doubtful for a moment. " That's it! It's all as plain as day now! You comes out and grabs the valise while I was inside!"

Instead of rushing, as every member of the crowd expected, she placed her hands upon her hips and smiled, but not in mirth.

" Did you say a yellow valise is missing, you rat?"

" Yeah, it was a old yaller valise!" Blethroad's wiry body was shaking with anger. " And it had all that forty thousand dollars in it, the dinero I got for my ranch! You know durned well where it is, and I want it pronto! And if I don't get it I'll have this squirt of a sheriff arrest you, ma'am!"

" Arrest me?"

" Yes, ma'am, arrest you!" Blethroad shrilled. He was shoved back by the sheriff.

" Huh!" snorted Mrs. Owens. Then she whirled, and in a moment she was among the pieces of luggage on the sidewalk, and flinging them right and left like a cyclone.

" Dirty, ornery stuff!" she panted. " Who'd think it had even forty cents in it?"

Something yellowish and flabby and old, but undeniably leather, sailed through the air, struck the side of the hotel and bounced back.

" There it is! There it is!" Blethroad yelled. " That's it!" Like a hooked-beaked buzzard he was on the valise, his shaking hands fumbling at its fastenings.

As he opened it the stout, large woman towered above him. She did not utter a syllable as he took packet after packet of bank-notes from the interior of the valise. She counted as he counted, however.

" There's forty of 'em all right!" she snapped. " You needn't count any more, you miserable old rat!"

While men and women watched, some of them snickering or openly laughing, Blethroad put the packets back into the valise and closed it. Then he was grabbed by the shoulders and hoisted bodily to his feet before he could offer resistance. He was slapped hard.

As he tried to curse he was slapped again, whirled around.

" Ben Owens, step forward !" the woman ordered, and her spouse obeyed promptly.

" And now, you miserable lyin' old polecat," Mrs. Owens addressed the owner of the forty thousand dollars, " you're going to apologize to my husband for accusing him of stealing your worthless money ! Go ahead !"

Blethroad snarled at her and told her to go to hell if she wanted an apology.

" Yeah ?" she demanded, and seemed to smile.

" Bet your durned life !" he answered, given new courage by the restoration of his wealth. He poked his stubborn jaw in her direction, and his slitted eyes glared defiance.

Instead of taking advantage of the offered jaw, with a sudden and unlooked-for movement she grabbed his old revolver from its holster and poked the end of it against his ribs.

" I think," she corrected, and seemed to smile again, " that you'll do the apologizing, you ornery old polecat ! And you'll do it now !" She pressed harder, gave the pistol a twist. " There he is right before you !" she prompted. " In case you don't happen to know him, that's Mr. Cal Owens, you durned old cattle-thief ! Five seconds ! One, two, three——"

Before she could say five Blethroad was stammering an apology that was as insincere as it was forced. She poked the pistol back into the holster at his hip.

" There, that'll be enough, you old rat ! I know you don't mean a word of it !" She turned and pointed a commanding hand at the litter on the sidewalk.

" Gather that stuff up Blethroad !" she ordered. " Put it back in that buckboard and find some other place to stop. This here is a decent hotel, and we don't want the trade of such as you !"

" We sure don't !" Owens echoed.

She gave him a look, the like of which he perhaps knew well. Then she uttered a sniff like the popping of a safety-valve, and marched back into the hotel.

CHAPTER III

Blethroad mouthed curses as he piled stuff into the buckboard. He was not willing to admit he had overlooked the precious valise. Somewhere and somehow there had been theft, then restitution. He muttered :

" I'd sure like to know how it was worked !" Nevertheless he was grimly thankful that he had his money now.

" This here town's sure goin' to miss you, Buck," an onlooker said.

" Well, I won't miss it!" Blethroad declared, and he was lying, for he was already avariciously homesick for the range he had left. " I'm goin' down to the coast and live like a white man."

" That's fine," the man agreed. " If I could afford it I'd do it myself."

" Huh ! Fools, they never can afford much !"

Climbing to the buckboard seat, Blethroad did not look for lodgings. As he drove away he took with him a hatred for all Ponderosa, and especially for Bob Gill and Mrs. Henrietta Owens.

" Them two ! If I was to stay here I'd sure make 'em eat crow !"

Though he had sold out and was leaving, he was not willing to leave his influence, his sinister machinations behind him. He was nearing the railroad station when his grim, leathery face brightened.

" I believe that's the idee !" he muttered aloud. " It's worth lookin' into anyway."

Now he forgot that he had believed everybody in Ponderosa his enemy, and his thoughts travelled back to the ranch he had sold. These thoughts created a problem, and the problem was how he was to get back the ranch and still keep the forty thousand dollars for which he had sold it to the woman he had never seen.

" Durn her !" he said. " If I was sure she was some rich old battle-axe I could marry her and maybe work it that way."

Stopping outside the station, he remained in his seat, pondering, trying to picture the woman to whom he had sold his ranch. He compressed his lips, shook his hoary head.

" Nope, that won't work. Too durned risky. If I married her she might turn out to be slicker'n me, and skin me."

Ponderosa was a combination town, part cattle, part lumber. The sun was low above the pine-clad westerly peaks. Blethroad stacked his nondescript luggage on the station platform, then bought a ticket for San Francisco. This time he did not leave the battered yellow valise with the other pieces, but kept it close at hand.

He had no desire to be here when the lumberjacks and sawmill men came into town to make it hum for a few night hours. They would be his enemies, too, especially when they learned what a fool he had made of himself because of the fancied loss of the little valise.

" Nope," he muttered behind his stringy moustache. " Didn't make a fool of myself. Somebody took it and sneaked it back when I started to raise hell about it. If it wasn't that woman it was the durned sheriff. Dunno which."

" Going to leave us for good, Mr. Blethroad ?" asked Kramer, the agent, as he delivered the ticket and the meticulous change.

The ex-rancher forced a chuckle.

" Yep ! Got my bellyful of raisin' cows, Joe. I'm goin' down to the coast to live like white folks from now on. Ain't got nothin' to worry about."

" I wish I could say as much," declared Kramer.

" Save your money, save your money and keep your eyes peeled for opportunities," Blethroad advised. " That's all you gotta do to be comfortable and independent when you get my age."

Learning that the westbound train was not due to arrive for some time, Blethroad went back to the main part of town. There, after some haggling, he sold the rig and the span of mustangs to McComas, the liveryman, for twenty dollars more than he had hoped to receive.

" Reckon you'll do most of your ridin' on the cyars from now on, Buck," ventured McComas.

" Yep ! That's what I mean to do."

From Levin, who owned a general store, Blethroad purchased what clothing he felt he must have for his venture into a new portion of the world.

" Say, dey vit you shust like de paper on de vall, Mr. Blethroad," said Levin in praise of his own wares.

" Don't want no fit like that," Blethroad grunted. " Want somethin' to make me feel comfortable and decent, that's all."

" Well, well, Buck," laughed John Campton, who owned the small bank, when he saw Blethroad in the ill-fitting black suit and the stiff white collar and ready-tied black tie, " I suppose the next we hear of you, you'll be in the banking business down at the coast."

" Like hell I will ! I been robbed enough by bankers in my time ! I don't propose to rob nobody !"

It was with a sense of having been grievously wronged that Blethroad rolled westward that night. He was leaving his country, the only country he knew, the country where he had made his fortune.

" I ain't goin' to be happy where I'm goin'," he told himself glumly. " Gotta be careful down there at the coast. Heard tell the whole country is filled with sharpers and slickers."

In Ponderosa he was not being materially missed, for the news of his sale to a rich woman had spread quickly to the lumberjacks and sawmill hands who had come to town after supper, and to the cowboys and ranchers who had ridden in.

The more talk there was, the more whisky that was drunk, the greater became the interest in Miss Kate Fielding. In the hotel saloon Sid Peltier had made a " book " in which he wagered two to one that the new owner of the Red Mesas

Ranch was not more than twenty-five, even money that she was blonde or brunette or in-between.

"But how do you know so much about her?" demanded a big lumberjack. "You ain't workin' some sure-thing on us, are you, Sid?"

"Just playing a hunch," the bartender smiled. "You fellows want to gamble, don't you?"

When Mrs. Owens learned of the betting she marched into the saloon, sweeping customers aside with her large, strong arms.

"Sid, you bettin' house money?" she demanded as she breasted against the bar.

"No, ma'am," replied Sid. "I'm riskin' my own dinero."

She fixed him with stern black eyes.

"Don't you bet a dollar of house money on such a fool game as this!" she ordered. "Of all the durned foolishness! Where's your chart, Sid?"

She examined the "book" he had made.

"Say, ain't she the old war-horse?" whispered a saw-mill man.

"Just about runs this sheebang," replied his companion. "I'd sure hate to make her mad."

"I dunno," muttered the sawyer. "I seen lots of her kind. They usually got big hearts when it's possible to find 'em."

Mrs. Owens was now holding down the pencilled chart with a stiff forefinger while she eyed Peltier.

"Sid, when's this female comin'?"

Peltier's explanation was supplemented by the words of several customers. Not one knew when Miss Kate Fielding was to arrive.

"Huh!" growled Mrs. Owens. "I'd like to know what that rich female looks like, Sid. Say, I'll bet you fifty dollars she's over forty!"

"Taken," drawled Peltier.

After fumbling in the depths of mysterious pockets, Mrs. Owens slapped fifty dollars in gold upon the bar.

"Ma'am," ventured a cowboy, "I thought as how you was against gamblin'."

"Oh, I am!" She tilted back her black head and laughed joyously. "I'll bet you fifty even she's blonde, or was once."

The cowboy did not have even five dollars, so Peltier said:

"I'll bet you fifty even she's a brunette, Mrs. Owens."

She laughed again as the money was covered, then looked about for somebody else who might be willing to risk his money. Seeing nobody who looked rich enough to be venturesome, she turned back to the bartender.

"Sid," she said, "I'll lay you a hundred even that she's a nice girl."

He asked what she meant by a nice girl.

"That there term's sure plenty elastic," put in the sawyer. "Once I knowed one as I figured was awful nice, and she wasn't nice a-tall, ma'am."

She turned complacently upon the onlookers.

"A nice girl," she said, "is one who behaves herself."

"Such as not goin' into saloons?" asked a rancher.

Mrs. Owens laughed again, this time till her full, still handsome face was flushed. Then she became serious.

"Yes, I mean a nice girl doesn't frequent saloons, boys. If she comes in here, or goes into any other joint in this town, I lose. How about it, Sid?"

"I'll cover that hundred Mrs. Owens," said Peltier, smiling. "It'll take all the money I have."

Making a third excursion into the depths of the mysterious pocket, she produced five double-eagles, then tapped Peltier on the back of a hand that covered as much money.

"Remember, Sid, you're betting she ain't a nice girl."

"That's all right, I'll make a note of it, ma'am."

She watched alertly until the memorandum was made, then waved a large and generous gesture.

"Step up, boys, and oil your throats!" she called. "This one's on the house!"

With slipper on the rail and bare elbow on the bar, she drank with the rest of them, and her whisky was as raw as theirs. This done, she regarded her reflection in the back bar mirror, grimaced. She went again to the pocket, and produced a fluffy contrivance with which she patted her nose and cheeks.

"Ma'am, you sure are a fine lookin' lady," remarked a lumberjack.

Her head came about quickly and she seemed to smile.

"I'm glad you made it lady," she drawled. "Thanks." Then she turned again to the bartender. "Sid, are you sure you don't know when this mysterious female is comin'?"

Peltier did not know, and nobody else knew. Just when it was thought that the date of Kate Fielding's arrival would furnish material for another "book." McComas, the liveryman, burst in, waving a sheet of yellowish paper.

"Hey, what's that you got, Joe?" Mrs. Owens demanded.

"Tellygram! Tellygram, Henny!" he declared soberly. "It's from her! It's from her!"

"From her?" Mrs. Owens frowned.

"Her!"

"Her?"

"Yeah, her!"

"Well, who the devil's her?" Before the liveryman could reply, she took the sheet of yellowish paper which she carefully smoothed upon the bar. To the surprise and

puzzlement of all who watched, she laughed as if she had discovered something very funny.

"Say, what's makin' you act that way?" demanded McComas.

"This reliable liveryman of Ponderosa!" she replied.

"Well, that's me!" he grunted.

"Yes, sure," she laughed, "but that's because you're the only liveryman here."

The message was indeed addressed to "Reliable Liveryman, Ponderosa, Arizona."

"It's from Chicago, ain't it?" asked Peltier.

"Sure it is," agreed Mrs. Owens, much preoccupied, since she was trying to form a mental picture of the sender of the message.

"Go ahead and read 'er, Henny," McComas ordered. "I ain't good at readin' aloud in public, but I figured as how all of you'd want to know."

There was silence as Mrs. Owens read:

"I SHALL ARRIVE IN PONDEROSA TUESDAY ON WEST-BOUND OVERLAND. HAVE YOUR BEST RIG AND FAST TEAM TO TAKE ME TO RED MESAS REGION WHERE I HAVE PURCHASED BAR B BAR RANCH. I SHALL WANT TO DEPART IMMEDIATELY UPON ARRIVAL AND SHALL TRUST YOU TO SUPPLY ME WITH EXPERIENCED AND TRUSTWORTHY DRIVER AND RELIABLE TEAM.

"KATE FIELDING."

"Well, she sure didn't keep inside the ten-word limit," drawled a lumberjack.

"'Course she didn't," put in a rancher. "She's got so much dinero she don't have to be stingy when she flings words over a wire."

Mrs. Owens was serious of mien when she handed the message back to the liveryman. She sighed.

"Now ain't that tough luck, Mac?" she complained. "There ain't any chance now to bet on when she's comin'. Tuesday's six days from to-day. Good-night, boys, and take it easy on the liquor."

CHAPTER IV

THOUGH overland trains laboured through Ponderosa, one had but to ride a few miles in any direction to reach wild cattle country where there were yet a few bad Indians. Ponderosa, of course, was no better than any other town on the frontier. Now all the wild and lawless and unusual happenings were forgotten save the expected arrival of the new owner of the Bar B Bar Ranch. The town could not have

been more excited had the Queen of Sheba come back to life and telegraphed that she was going to pay Ponderosa a visit.

Nor was the interest and excitement that of the men alone. The women openly or secretly decided that they would copy Miss Fielding's style and manners. But here, too, they met a dilemma. Was Miss Fielding young or old? Was she short and dumpy or tall and willowy? Was she striking, beautiful, or merely notable because she had a lot of money?

"Sure, and I'll not be the one to mimic her! dissented Mrs. Nora Slattery, who ran the boarding-house at the Ralston sawmill. "If she's ould and hatchet-faced, me own style and me own clothes is good enough for meself!"

"But if she's young and handsome and slim?" protested Jack Gibbons, one of her boarders.

Mrs. Slattery rested her hands upon her hips.

"And would I not look foine with fancy lace and pink bows on me underthings?" she demanded ironically. "Now will ye be takin' yerself away, Misther Gibbons, before I happen to bend the handle of a skillet over yer fool head?"

It was about this time that Sheriff Bob Gill strolled into the hotel. For a sheriff Bob Gill was very young, and had such a genuine, boyish grin that all of the women liked him and perhaps a few could have loved him. He found Mrs. Owens' back of the counter in the small and over-decorated lobby. He grinned, and she was forced to smile in return in spite of hér perplexity which was caused by the adding of some figures.

"Take yourself away, pronto, Sheriff!" she ordered, and did not mean it. "If I was twenty years younger I'd take Owens by the seat of the pants and the scruff of the neck and chuck him out, and marry you, Bob, you're that handsome and likeable."

Gill lounged against the counter and appraised her, a twinkle in his blue eyes and a grin on the rest of his face.

"I don't believe," he drawled, "that I'd let you do it."

"Why not?" she demanded, then laughed. "You'd be sorry for me? Is that it?"

Gill had already established a reputation as an efficient peace officer, and in so doing he had been materially aided by his coolness and habitual composure. He was as likely to grin into the muzzle of a threatening six-shooter as he was to respond to a funny story or a humorous joke. Now soberly:

"No, Mrs. Owens, I'm going to marry another woman."

Every unmarried woman in the region had dreamed of becoming Mrs. Gill. Now Henrietta Owens was so interested that she momentarily forgot Kate Fielding.

"And who's the lucky girl?" she demanded.

Gill gave her a puzzling grin and shook his brown head.

The lucky lady hasn't told me to announce our engagement yet, Henny."

Mrs. Owens was even more interested now. She mentioned several names, but to each Gill shook his head. She frowned, trying to think of more eligible girls. The sheriff still shook his head.

"Huh, you're just jokin', like you usually are!" she accused.

"Nope, I'm dead serious this time."

"But look here," she insisted, "you ought to confide in me as an old friend. I won't let it go any further, honest!"

Again Bob Gill grinned and shook his head.

"Please! I'll tell you what I'll do, Bob, I'll see she gets a weddin' present that don't cost a cent less than a hundred!"

"Cents?"

"No, not cents! If you had any sense you'd know I wouldn't buy a present as cheap as that!"

He appraised her soberly now.

"No, there's nothing small about you."

"Well, what if I do tip the beam at a hundred and ninety?" she demanded, but reddened. "It's beef that's all paid for. What's her name, Bob?"

When the sheriff seemed in doubt she looked at him hopefully, and though she was fifteen years older than he, she felt a decided fluttering in the region of her heart. To her, and to everyone else in Ponderosa, Bob Gill was more or less a mystery. He never talked much about himself. One day a few years ago he had appeared in town from nobody knew where. A few months later he had been made under-sheriff and chief-deputy by the now dead Dan Patterson.

Though he had never assumed superior manners, certain flashes betrayed the fact that he was not only well educated but of fine family. It was rumoured that he was the scion of some rich Eastern family, that he was a gentleman criminal, that he had come to Ponderosa in order that he might not further disgrace and humiliate his people.

Mrs. Owens had never quite known whether to believe any of the rumours about him. She did know that she had liked him from the start. Now she favoured him with her most motherly smile.

"Please, Bob! Of all the ladies in this town you should tell me first!"

He grinned, lifted his brows.

"Ladies?"

She started to flare into anger, but the anger vanished and left her almost tearful. Her head dropped.

"That's right, I guess, Bob," she said softly.

He quickly placed a hand over one of hers.

"Henny," he said, "that wasn't fair of me, was it?"

She managed a smile now, and shrugged.

"If you know, then you're the only one."

"But I don't know. I just guessed about it, Henny."

"To anybody else?" she asked quickly, and her black eyes were threatening.

He shook his head, and she caught his hand impetuously.

"Bob Gill, no wonder women like you! You know how to keep your mouth shut."

"You're alright, Henny," the sheriff said. "I'd bet my last dollar on you."

"Thanks," she said. "As long as you guessed it, I did take the bit in my teeth for a while, just a few months, that's all. It was before I met Cal Owens."

Now Bob seemed in such deep meditation that she wondered whether he had heard her confession.

"You know, Henny," he said, "maybe I should tell you."

"Of course you should!" she cried, and forgot that she had just humbled her own soul by confession. "Please do, Bob! I swear I won't let it out."

"She doesn't live here," he said.

"Then for goodness' sake, where does she live?"

When he told her she drew back in amazement, and did not know whether to believe her own ears.

"What? Do you mean to tell me you are going to marry that Fielding woman who bought out Buck Blethroad?"

"Not that Fielding woman," he corrected quietly, yet with something in his eyes that hit her like a slap across the mouth.

"I mean Miss Fielding," she apologized, colouring. "But Bob, I didn't even know you knew her!"

"Maybe I don't."

"Why, you durned idiot!" she laughed. "You may have been a good peace officer since you've been in this country, but what on earth put this fool idea into your head?"

"Oh," he drawled, "I just decided to marry her."

She backed up until she could brace against a littered shelf, then came forward until she could put her puzzled face close to his.

"Oh, I know you ain't drunk," she said. "You never get drunk. You're the worst saloon customer in this whole town."

She had never doubted his intelligence or courage; now she began to doubt the former.

"Say, have you talked this over with that—with Miss Fielding?" she asked ironically.

"I haven't had the opportunity to discuss it with her, Henny."

"Well, you darned fool! What's the matter with your head, Bob Gill?"

"I'm in love, in love for the first time."

She uttered something like a sniff, then backed away in order that she might see him better.

"Of all the idiotic things I ever heard of! Don't you know she's rich?"

"Heard she was. Wouldn't have her any other way."

"Oh, so you wouldn't have her any other way? Bob, have you turned into a fortune hunter? I hadn't thought that of you!"

"Call me that if you want," he replied doggedly. "I'm going to marry her."

She pointed out that he had never seen Kate Fielding, did not know what she was like. She might easily be old enough to be his mother, for all they knew.

"But she isn't," he insisted.

"Then likely she's old enough to be your grandmother. I'll bet she's some old maid, some hatchet-faced school-ma'am who's pinched pennies till she's saved enough to come out here and buy herself a cow ranch where she thinks she'll find——"

"Romance," he supplied.

"She'll sure find plenty of that if she up and married you, Bob Gill! Say, have you taken to smoking hop?"

He grinned, then fished Durham sack and papers from his pocket and rolled a cigarette.

"Still stick to the Bull, Henny. Did you mention a bet a while ago?" Something in his eyes told her not to rail out at him as she wanted to do. It also told her not to offer to wager with him. "If this wasn't such a serious even sacred matter, Henny, I'd bet you five hundred I'd marry her."

She told him she would not bet, but there was in her mind a vague suspicion that she was being tricked, laughed at.

"Sheriff Bob," she demanded, "is this some sort of practical joke?"

"No joke," The sheriff shook his head. "I was never more serious in all my life."

"Of about thirty years!" she sniffed.

"Twenty-eight, Henny. You see I was born early."

"Oh, all right!" She laughed. "Well, if you're going to marry her I sure don't want to see you disappointed. I hope she's young and pretty. But say, Sheriff Bob, you ought to tell me what she looks like."

"But maybe I shouldn't," he drawled.

"Of course you should, Sheriff Bob. Tell me what she looks like."

Turning his back to her, he leaned against the counter and blew smoke-rings towards the fly-specked ceiling.

"Well, for one thing, she has auburn hair."

"She has? What else?"

"Hazel eyes."

"Yeah!"

"Sure, and she's so pretty you'd like her, Henny. And she's sweet and striking, too."

"Oh, hell, yes!" she exploded now. "She just looks like a real angel!"

"That's it," he admitted. "She's angelic without knowing it."

"Uh-huh. What else?"

Slowly, as if he were putting each word through a smoke-ring, he informed her that Miss Kate Fielding was five feet five inches in height and weighed about a hundred and twenty pounds.

"Well, go on! What size shoes does she wear?"

The sheriff turned now.

"My dear lady," he said soberly, "I have not yet inspected her feet, but I assure you she has pretty ankles."

Henny sniffed now, but managed to suppress some hot words. She laughed.

"You haven't told me her age, Sheriff Bob."

"Why, that's right, I haven't! She's just twenty-five."

"Twenty-five," she repeated, then realized that the sheriff was sauntering towards the door, his holstered Colt visible at his left side. As she watched him go there began to burn in her mind a new feeling towards him, a feeling of hatred, though she had liked and admired him before. This hatred was not because of her half-suspicion that he was making her the butt of a joke, but because, with his keen and almost uncanny way of reading people, he had discovered that she had had a past, and had made her admit it.

Her black eyes smouldered and her white teeth bared as she glared at the door through which the young sheriff had disappeared.

"He won't marry her!" she hissed. "He won't marry her because I'm not going to let him. I don't care who she is or what she looks like!"

Despite this strange and ungovernable rage, Mrs. Owens was in the saloon within a few minutes, offering to wager five hundred dollars that the woman who had bought the Bar B Ranch from Buck Blethroad was not more than twenty-six years old and had auburn hair.

"Oh, no!" Peltier told her. "You've been using the telegraph wires, Mrs. Owens."

She laughed, then slapped gold money on to the bar.

"Honest to grandma, Sid!" she pledged. "You go up to the station and find out whether I've used the wires. I'm just playing a hunch. Say, we all forgot that half the rich girls in stories have auburn hair."

She kept her foot on the rail, but looked about, smiling. "Any of the rest of you hombres want to cover this five hundred?" she drawled.

"No takers, ma'am," said the bartender. "That bunch there couldn't dig up fifty all told."

CHAPTER V

As the next two days passed Mrs. Owens found that she was more and more the victim of senseless resentment towards Sheriff Gill. She realized the foolishness of this rage, but her nature was such that she was powerless to cast it aside. She seemed to derive a distinct, savage pleasure from having somebody to hate, though heretofore she had been fond of the young sheriff.

It was not that she feared Gill would gossip about her past, but rather that there might be others as discerning as he, and that they would be less considerate. Just why she should hate the sheriff for this possibility she did not try to explain to herself, but she began to seek some method by which she could secure revenge on him. She was aware that she could not injure his reputation, for he was perhaps the most popular citizen in Ponderosa and he had an innate way of making friends and holding them. Nor did she have any doubts as to Gill's courage.

She did not see her chance until the fourth day after Blethroad's departure. Then a stranger arrived from the West. This man was undeniably urbane, though he seemed familiar enough with the range country, too. The end of a pistol holster showed beneath the hem of his blue serge coat, but this did not excite attention, for pistols were no novelty here.

The stranger was about the same age as the sheriff. They were of similar height and weight. While Gill was clean-shaven, the newcomer wore a neat brownish moustache. Mrs. Owens, behind the hotel counter, felt the magnetism of his smile and his brown eyes as he strolled towards her.

As he came closer, however, she noted tiny lines upon his handsome face, lines that seemed to indicate he was older than she had judged at first, or had compressed much into his years.

"I am James Sharon," he said. "Can you put me up here, madam ?"

"We sure can," she replied. "Going to stay long, or just for a day or two ?"

She had a fleeting thought that he was an advance agent for Miss Kate Fielding, then remembered that he had come from the West.

"That depends," he said after he had written his name in the register. "If I like your little town I may decide to make it my home for some time."

After some hard thinking, Mrs. Owens placed him professionally. He was a gambler. Yes, he was the type. Then she was not so certain, for he said :

" What are the chances for investment here, madam ?"

Her black eyes examined him keenly. Yes, he was the type. Likely he wanted to buy a saloon where he could run his games.

" Well, there are five places here in town," she said. " I don't believe any of them are for sale. Of course there's plenty of room to open up a new one, Mr. Sharon."

He regarded her in apparent perplexity, and in his smile she saw a flash of gold on his two upper front teeth.

" I don't believe I quite follow you, madam."

" Don't you want to open a saloon ?"

" Saloon ?" He looked at her in much surprise. " Why, I wouldn't own one if it was given to me. Of course I take an occasional drink."

" Then how about one right now ?" she suggested, and gave him a sample of her loud, hearty laugh.

" Do you mean it ?" he demanded in pleased surprise.

" If I don't, who does ?"

In the bar-room they found Owens, who was some " three sheets in the wind." He was favoured with a frown and a reproachful look from the black eyes. Mrs. Owens put a foot on the iron rail.

" G-go in and look after the office," Owens stammered.

" You'd better !" his spouse agreed. " There's nobody there."

To the inhabitants of Ponderosa the presence of the hotel-keeper's wife in the saloon was no novelty. Sharon apparently did not think it unusual. He ordered whisky.

" Give me a small beer, Sid," Mrs. Owens said. " This is Mr. James Sharon."

Peltier shook hands with the newcomer.

The excitement occasioned by the expected arrival of Kate Fielding still ran high. In the saloon more than half the talk was about her, and it was but a few minutes before Sharon began to smile questioningly.

" I say, what is this ?" he asked after he had wiped his moustache with a white silk handkerchief. " This town appears to have more life than I had expected."

There were many who were willing to explain to him that a rich woman had bought the old Bar B Bar Ranch in the Red Mesas country.

" No !" ejaculated Sharon. He turned to Mrs. Owens " I suppose you have seen her. This begins to be interesting."

He was told that nobody in Ponderosa had seen Miss Fielding, though Mrs. Owens made the mental reservation that she was certain Bob Gill had seen her, else how could he have given a detailed description of her ?

" Likely some grouchy spinster or fat dowager from back East," Sharon ventured. " Possibly some rich widow from Texas or the Indian Nations country."

Mrs. Owens' opinion of the stranger benefited by this

remark. His talk proved that he knew where cattle were raised, at least.

"Heap of money bein' bet on what she looks like," said an onlooker.

"No?" chuckled Sharon. "Say, this is good! A rich lady buys a big ranch and nobody knows what she looks like. But I suppose she'll operate it as an absentee?"

"Huh! What bane one of dam tings?" demanded a big Swede from the woods.

Sharon explained patiently.

"Nope!" declared a cowboy. "She's a-comin' out here to run the spread herself. Ain't you seen her, pardner? If you have we'll know who wins on what she looks like."

Sharon smiled, lifted dark brows.

"I see her? Sure I haven't!" He turned to the woman beside him. "Mrs. Owens, perhaps you can describe her to me. I'm beginning to be interested."

"Auburn hair," she said seriously. "Hazel eyes, and quite pretty, from what we hear."

"Very good to date," Sharon drawled, "but the matter of eyes? How about that? I am told that occasionally elderly ladies manage to create auburn hair."

"Twenty-five, maybe twenty-six," Mrs. Owens explained confidently.

"Say how do you know how old she is?" demanded a sawmill hand. "You been holdin' out on us, Henny?"

"Oh, I have a way of learning things," she replied with a little smirk.

Immediately there was a new offering of money at even odds that Miss Kate Fielding was not more than twenty-six years of age.

After some deliberate thought, Sharon remarked that he would cover a hundred dollars of the money with the understanding that he was wagering on the heiress's being more than forty.

"You'll lose, Mr. Sharon!" warned Henrietta Owens.

"Maybe so," he smiled, "but I'll take the chance just the same."

The money was "covered" with Peltier as stake holder. Mrs. Owens' eyes were now shrewd and probing. Was it possible this newcomer was an advance agent for Miss Fielding after all?

"I'll bet he is!" she told herself. "That son-of-a-gun acts like he knows what he's talkin' about!"

A few minutes later she was not at all certain Sharon knew Kate Fielding. She was wondering whether she should ask him directly, when the front door swung open and Sheriff Gill came in.

In her pleasure over the arrival of the stranger, Mrs. Owens had half-forgotten the sheriff. Now her resentment towards

him flared anew. Her practised eyes measured the two men, compared them and she had to admit that there was something about the sheriff that seemed lacking in Sharon, yet she soon discovered that this lacking quality was something she wanted to see in the newcomer.

" Glad to meet you, Sharon," Gill said when they were introduced.

" Happy to know you, Sheriff," returned the newcomer. " Would you join us ?"

Gill ordered a sack of tobacco, and Mrs. Owens laughed somewhat derisively.

" Our sheriff's a sort of no-drink hombre," she explained. " I think he's afraid that if he takes too much somebody'll steal a march on him."

" That's exactly it, Henny !" Gill declared, and the expression in his eyes caused the woman to hate him more than before.

" I rather agree with him there," said Sharon. " I'll take cigar."

" Well, I'll be dog-goned !" she laughed. " Say, Sid, give me a pack of Caporals !"

She lit a cigarette, rested an elbow on the bar.

" Say, Sheriff Bob," she said, " Mr. Sharon's just bet a hundred that she's forty or better."

" Worse," Sharon corrected. " Don't forget that a lady's charms are always in reverse proportion to her years. You, of course, are the exception, Mrs. Owens."

" And you're a liar !" Mrs. Owens laughed. " I'm forty-seven and I don't care who knows it."

She discovered that the newcomer was regarding the sheriff intently and that Gill was returning the scrutiny. His likeable but now angering grin was on his sun-browned face.

" I think you are going to lose, Sharon," said the sheriff.

Sharon smiled, shrugged, brushed some cigar ashes from a lapel of his spotless blue coat.

" Somebody has to lose," he drawled.

" Say——" Mrs. Owens cried, but compressed her lips.

" Were you going to say something, Henny ?" asked Sheriff Gill.

" Nothing that would interest you !" she retorted, then laughed quickly to conceal her rage towards this man whom she knew she should not hate.

Gill, meanwhile, had turned and was leaving. The door swung shut behind him.

" So you're going to marry her, are you ?" Mrs. Owens sneered silently at his departing back. " Well, I guess not !"

The next moment she was smiling at her new guest.

" Trot along with me, Mr. Sharon, I'll show you your room. I suppose you'll want the best in the house, sir ?"

Sharon said that he appreciated the best, but added :

" I've often had the worst."

" Oh, we all take the worst at times," she said ruefully.

In the fly-specked lobby they found Owens drowsily sucking an unlit cigar.

" Go up and take a nap, Cal," she ordered. " I'll run the sheebang for a while."

After Owens had laboriously climbed the stairs she turned to Sharon. Her eyes were bright now because she had made a discovery.

" You said you were lookin' for an investment, Mr. Sharon ? Well, I believe I know just what you want, that is if you know anything about handlin' horses."

" Handling horses, eh ?" he laughed. " Why, I've worked with them half my life."

She said she thought he could buy the livery stable.

" That is if you're willing to pay what it's worth. I know Joe McComas wants to sell out, but he knows how to drive a bargain."

Sharon seemed mildly interested. She smiled, touched his well-tended hand which rested on the counter.

" If you haven't got enough money, what you say we go into partnership on the deal ? I can put in a few hundred."

" Oh, I think I can handle it alone," he said, " provided it doesn't take more than three or four thousand dollars."

" Three or four thousand ? Say, I'll bet that if you savvy how to drive a bargain you can buy Joe McComas out, horn, hide and tail, for fifteen hundred ! Yes, not more than seventeen-fifty at the outside."

After a few minutes more of talk, Sharon admitted that he was interested. He always liked to be around horses, in fact he seldom saw a horse he did not actually love. Mrs. Owens gave him such a motherly smile that it could have been confession of a desire to be other than his adviser and guardian.

" But you fail to see the big point," she said, and her black eyes twinkled. " If you get the stable you can be the one to drive Kate Fielding out to her ranch the first time !"

Sharon frowned, looked indifferent.

" But suppose she's old and homely ?" he suggested. " Why should I want to drive her out ?"

" Well, what difference does that make ?" Mrs. Owens demanded. " She's got dinero, and plenty of it. That's what counts, ain't it ?"

Sharon smiled doubtfully, still showed little interest.

" Oh, take a chance !" she encouraged. " Here's the opportunity of your life, man !"

Presently he agreed to talk with McComas. The business might be better than it sounded.

As he went out and turned towards the livery stable he had difficulty in suppressing a laugh, but if that laugh had

been uttered it would have been louder and more knowing than Henrietta Owens' laugh back in the lobby.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER different circumstances Bob Gill could have derived much amusement from the excitement in Ponderosa. Now as he sat alone in his office down the main street from the hotel, he candidly admitted that he was worried. He was fully aware of the dangers a woman would have to meet in coming out here to run a cattle ranch if she were not experienced in Western life.

What particularly bothered him was the fact that when Blethroad had left the Bar B Bar he had not taken with him the dozen or so hard-bitten riders he had employed. He had left them to ride for the new owner.

" She'll sure have trouble with that outfit if she doesn't know how to handle hard men," the sheriff muttered, and remembered that he himself had had more than a little trouble with some of the Blethroad riders.

Until yesterday Gill had not thought seriously about Henrietta Owens. She had been good company, bright if not brilliant. She had an interesting and intriguing disregard for the conventions, and here regard for conventions did not count greatly. Now he saw her as a different woman, scheming, designing, more intelligent than he had thought her, and possibly less honest.

Her hatred of him, suddenly as it had developed, had been evident to him from its start. He supposed that what he had guessed correctly about her past accounted for part of this rage, but he did not believe it accounted for all of it, and attributed the remainder to the coming of Kate Fielding.

While he believed he knew fairly well what sort of person Mrs. Owens was, he could not accuse her of selfishness. As far as he knew she had slight appreciation of the value of money. Her charity and generosity were not to be questioned, for the sheriff knew a number of unfortunate persons she had helped.

" I wonder though, just what she figures to make out of this ?" he asked himself, and remembered that no penniless lumberjack or cowboy ever came to town to be refused accommodation at the hotel, even to the extent of meals and liquor. On the basis of this mental argument he could not find it cogent that Mrs. Owens expected to profit by the coming of Kate Fielding beyond what the hotel and saloon would make out of the patronage a rich woman would bring indirectly.

As for Sharon, he would have had little doubt of the man

except for what he had seen and heard during his recent brief visit to the hotel saloon. Though the newcomer had some of the characteristics of a range man, he looked and acted more like a professional gambler or even a saloonkeeper. Now Gill's knowledge of human nature and his quick ability for interpreting looks and smiles and frowns made him suspect that between Sharon and Mrs. Owens was some real or hoped-for understanding.

"I wish I knew what that fellow is doing here," he told himself. He did not believe his arrival had anything to do with Kate Fielding. "I suppose the only way to find out why he came is to wait and see."

There were shuffling steps on the broad walk, and Joe McComas came in, chuckling and grinning, and jingling gold money in both of his pants pockets.

"Well, well, Joe," said the sheriff, "break some faro bank?"

McComas lit a big cigar, chuckled again.

"Struck 'er rich Bob!" he declared. "Yessir! Struck 'er rich!" Crudely aware of the value of suspense, he let several minutes go by before he explained how he had come into possession of the handfuls of gold money.

"Yep! Sold out to that durned tenderfoot as comes in to-day from the West, Sheriff. Durned fool, he pays me two thousand for the business too. Durned sight more'n it's worth, but he seemed to be grass-bellied with dinero and he up and offers me the price, and I figgers I'd jest as well take it."

"That's fine, Joe," he said. "You've been wanting to get rid of the business for a good while, haven't you?"

McComas admitted this was true, then chuckled again.

"I'd 've sold 'er to any man for fifteen hundred, Sheriff."

Gill wondered why the urbane stranger could want a small livery business in this frontier town, where even moderate profits meant a lot of hard work. McComas, who smoked awkwardly, was blowing out great clouds of smoke and sucking audibly on the cigar.

"Yep!" he grinned. "The Reliable Liveryman of Ponderosa has done gone out of business, Sheriff! There's a new Reliable Liveryman here now."

Gill recalled the telegram McComas had received from Miss Kate Fielding. He recalled, too, the peculiar manner in which it had been addressed. Until now that message had been the cause of much more amusement than worry, for McComas was experienced and reliable enough to drive anybody anywhere. Now the message had a different portent, for it meant that someone else, very probably Sharon, would drive Miss Fielding to her newly-acquired ranch when she arrived.

"Say, Bob," the old man asked suddenly, "do you know what this here Fieldin' woman really looks like?"

The sheriff shrugged and grinned.

"Do you, Joe ?"

McComas' jaw dropped.

"But Henny Owens tells me you told her the colour of her eyes and her hair, and even her weight on the hoof, Bob !"

The sheriff said he must have been guessing, like everybody else was guessing about Kate Fielding.

"Well, I reckon your guess's as good as anybody's, Sheriff," chuckled McComas. "But gosh a'mighty, accordin' to what Henny Owens, she tells me, you described that female plenty akkerate. It was so akkerate that I decided to bet this extry five hundred she's jest like what you says she is. Ghosh durn it, I was already figgerin' I'd be five hundred richer."

Gill reminded him that the town had no more money to wager on what Kate Fielding looked like.

"Maybe you think so," grunted the man who had sold the livery stable, "but I know a heap different. I can work round among them lumberjacks and cowboys tonight, maybe spendin' ten or twenty dollars to whet up their bettin' instincts, and get 'em to cover full five hundred on how she don't look nohow like you claim she looks like. Gosh durn it !"

"Joe," said the sheriff sternly, though he wanted to smile, "you're a confounded old robber. Here you get five hundred more for your business than you would have taken, and you just about cry because you can't win another five hundred on a sure-thing bet."

"Ain't no sure-thing bet a-tall !" the old man flared "It's because I'd back your judgment, Bob, back 'er to hell and back ! If you say she looks like a muley cow, I'll bet my last peso she looks like a muley cow !"

Gill smiled at this emphatic expression of confidence.

"But I might be wrong, Joe."

"Never knowed you to be wrong yet ! And if you claim she looks more like a muley cow than she does a female woman, I'll bet she does !"

"Oh, you old robber, go put your money in the bank !" the sheriff advised. "That's the safest way for you to take care of it."

"Old robber, am I ?" McComas growled, then lost his anger as suddenly as he had found it. "I done said a little while ago that feller I sold out to was a tenderfoot, didn't I ?"

The sheriff nodded.

"Well, he ain't !" The old man hitched his chair to where he could tap Gill's leg. "That feller sure ain't no tenderfoot, Bob ! He's a slicker, if I ever seen one, and I seen enough to rekonize plenty of their earmarks and brands. So I says to myself if he wants to pay me five hundred more'n that durned dirty business is worth, it's his lookout."

The old man hitched his chair even closer, tapped the leg again.

" Now you listen to me, Sheriff Bob! Though I don't think there's any use tellin' you anything, durn it, 'cause you got a way of findin' things out yourself. Well, any how, here she is! That jasper as calls himself Sharon don't figger to lose no money by buyin' me out. He's workin' some sort of skin-game, that's what he's doin'!"

Though he more than half-believed the old man to be right, the sheriff said nothing. He had suspected something like this, but proving it was a different matter.

" Jest as sure's hell that feller's a slicker, Sheriff!" went on McComas. " You keep your eye on him and see! He handed me that extry five hundred too durned easy to be givin' it away total. His kind, they don't give away no dinero, they invest it."

Still Gill remained silent. McComas groaned, rose.

" Gosh a'mighty, this here's a awful disappointment to me, Sheriff. I'd figgered I could win me another five hundred on what that Fieldin' gal looks like. But I reckon I'll jest have to be content with that five hundred I didn't expect to get anyhow."

The old man went to the doorway, stood there undecided. He was called back to face a grinning sheriff, who looked as if he were anything but a tamer of bad men.

" What you want, Bob?" McComas asked hopefully.

" Are you dead set on wanting to bet that five hundred, Joe?"

" I was."

To McComas's surprise, he was told to wager his money.

" Huh? But you told me jest now you didn't know what she looks like!"

" And you told me that if I said she looked like a muley cow you'd back my guess, Joe."

" By gosh, that's right! I'll do it!" McComas became cautious, however, as he jingled gold in his pockets. " But if you never seen her, how you know what she looks like, Sheriff?"

" Joe," the sheriff grinned enigmatically, but his eyes were contemplative, " when you hear the name of a strange woman mentioned, don't you try to picture her, to visualize her?"

" You mean——"

" Sort of a picture of her in your mind," prompted Gill.

The old man pondered now, then grinned a little sheepishly.

" By golly, Sheriff, that's right! I never yet heard the name of a strange female mentioned that I wasn't beginning to tell myself what she looked like, whether I was right or not. Most allus I make 'em durned purty and young, too."

" Of course," Gill agreed, " it's much pleasanter to make your mind pictures that way."

Gill received a long, probing look from the pale-blue eyes.

" You made a mind-picture of that there Fieldin' woman, Bob?"

" Miss Kate Fielding," the sheriff corrected.

" Miss—Kate Fielding," the old man repeated. " Say, are you sure she ain't some rich grass widder, Sheriff ?"

" My mind picture doesn't show her as a grass widow, Joe, rich or otherwise," drawled Gill.

The old man walked about the office, grisled head bent, money jingling. He stopped, looked down at the sheriff, who sat back now, his boots on the desk.

" It's this way, Bob, fer instance, if you had big money, would you bet it that this here mind picture of yourn is kerrect ?"

Gill nodded.

" I would under different circumstances."

" Sech as——"

Gill explained that strangely he had scruples against betting on what any woman might look like. The old man pondered.

" Ye-ah, I can savvy how some fellers might feel that away. It's a sorter delikerate subjeck, but there ain't nothin' that delikerate about me. This here five hundred didn't cost me nothin', and if I lose it——"

" I think," drawled Gill, " that if you bet it you won't lose it."

" That there mind picture of yourn is that akkerate ?"

Gill nodded. After a few more doubtful moments McComas sat down and began to scribble notes on a piece of paper with a dull pencil.

" Better read them to me," suggested the sheriff.

The paper was shoved towards him.

" You read 'em, Bob. I never was no good at readin' out loud. Besides, you'd best read 'em quick afore that writin' gets cold."

Gill kept a sober face while he read silently :

" Broun hare, hazul eyes, hits about 5-5. Swete smil, two."

" That's a powerful purty mind picture, Sheriff," the old man prompted.

" A mighty pretty mind picture," Gill agreed absently. He shoved back the notes. " Can you memorize them, Joe ? I think it would be better if you didn't have them to refer to when you make your bets."

" You mean learn 'em by heart, Sheriff ? Sure, I can ! I got the picture of that there gal right in my mind now. Say, she's sure a purty one, ain't she ?"

Bob watched the old man walk about the room, chuckling and jingling his gold.

" By golly, Bob, I'm a'goin' to be five hundred richer to-morrer mornin' ! 'Course I'll have to spend a few pesos gettin' them lumberjacks and cowboys in proper frame of mind to bet agin me but don't mind that a-tall. See you

to-morrer mornin', Sheriff, and thanks a heap for this here mind picture of her. I knowed durned good you didn't think she looked like a muley cow."

Called back, McComas was told that he could probably save ten or twenty dollars.

"Huh? How?"

"I have a hunch that if you go at it right, Joe, Henny Owens will cover your bet."

"Naw? You think so, Bob? 'Course she's allus got a seckful of dinero."

"Try it. Let me know to-morrow how it turned out."

Watching the old man go, Bob felt more strongly than before that somehow he was to be the victim of Mrs. Owens' scheming, and he felt no qualms because he was trying to even matters by helping the old liveryman to take a few hundred dollars of her money. He lit a cigarette, leaned his chair farther back, half-closed his eyes.

"And the plot thickens," he mused aloud. "Mind pictures. Yes, mind pictures."

CHAPTER VII

After McComas had gone Gill sat for a long time, wrapped in troubled thoughts. He was certain of conspiracy but where and what was it? That Sharon could have come and bought the livery stable could not be coincidental with the expected arrival of Kate Fielding. Still, the young sheriff admitted, it could be coincidence.

"Dog-gone it!" he growled. "Why did she want to buy a ranch out here, and of all, the Bar B Bar outfit?"

As sheriff, he reasoned it was his duty to stop conspiracy before it developed, if this were possible, but now he almost wished he were not sheriff of Ponderosa.

At about the time Gill rose resolutely from his office chair, McComas sauntered into the hotel.

"Why, howdy, Joe!" greeted Mrs. Owens. "No business at the barn?"

She expressed much surprise when he informed her he no longer owned the livery stable.

"My, my! What are we going to do without you, Joe? It won't seem natural, somebody else runnin' the old barn."

McComas said he was not going to leave Ponderosa.

"I reckon I wasn't fit to run no business," he confessed sheepishly. "All this excitement 'bout a rich gal comin' got me so flustered I feel jest like a agitated old lady. Ain't fit for nothin', Henny."

"Why, you do look a little flustered, Joe. What's the matter with you?"

McComas was indeed looking agitated, for he fumbled his hat with his hands, stood upon one foot and then the other.

"Yes, sir!" he declared. "I feel jest like a agitated old lady that's all worked up 'cause her fav'rite grand-daughter's goin' to have a baby."

Mrs. Owens laughed heartily.

"That's sure a great comparison, Joe."

"Well, it's the way I feel. I'm that worked up a-thinkin' about what that Fieldin' woman looks like."

The black eyes gave him a shrewd look.

"Say, has that stranger, Mr. Sharon, really bought you out, Joe? I sure didn't have any idea he'd want such a common business as a livery stable."

To prove that he had actually sold out, the old man jingled gold money in his pants pockets.

"Yep! Sold 'er, horn, hide and tail, Henny! That feller sure knows how to do business without wastin' no time!"

Mrs. Owens suggested that they go into the bar for a drink.

"Thankee, I'd best not. I'm that nervous I don't feel like even a dram."

He shuffled nervously now, grinned as if he were already under the influence of liquor.

"You bet!" he went on. "I'm in jest such a state o' mind I don't know what to do with myself. I sure wish that rich gal'd come so's I could quit thinkin' 'bout what she looks like."

She said that when Kate Fielding came on Tuesday his suspense would be ended.

"By the way," she added, "have you seen Bob Gill?"

"You mean the sheriff?"

"He's the only Gill in town, ain't he?"

"Sure, sure! Yeah, I seen him just long enough to tell him I sold out. You want to see him?"

"Oh, no, I don't want to see him, Joe. What'd he think about you sellin' out?"

"Why, he didn't say either way. As likely you know, he ain't much on expressin' his opinions on what other men do."

She admitted she knew this to be true of the sheriff.

"Well, I'll be rablin' on," he said. "Dog-gone me, Henny, I sure wish I knowed what that gal looks like!"

"Well, what do you think she looks like? Most everybody in town has some idea of his own."

McComas seemed much puzzled, while in reality he would have wagered his entire two thousand dollars that somehow the sheriff was right.

"I sure been tryin' awful hard to form one of them there mind pictures of her," he confessed. "You savvy how it is,

folks allus seem to form mind pictures of other folks they hear about but ain't seen yet."

She said she thought they did, then asked what his mental picture of Miss Kate Fielding was.

McComas screwed up his wrinkled features.

"We-el," he began, "she ain't so old."

"Maybe not, but what makes you think she ain't, Joe? You ain't seen her."

"Nope, 'course I ain't seen her any more'n you have, Henny, but it's this away. If she was at least middle-aged she'd have too much sense to buy a cow ranch away out here and have no man to run it for her. I'm dead certain on that there point."

She laughed. Not so long ago she had been willing to wager money that the sheriff's description of Miss Kate Fielding was right, but now she hated and resented the sheriff, and was not so sure of his being right. Too, Sharon had contended that Miss Fielding was over forty, and now Mrs. Owens was willing to risk many dollars that Sharon was right.

"Well, what's the colour of her hair, Joe?".

"Hair? Hair? What colour's her hair, you say?"

"Yes. You heard what I said."

Again the old man screwed up his face in deep thought. He seemed to be trying to attain clairvoyancy.

"Well, it don't seem to be exactly red," he muttered.

"No?" Mrs. Owens asked, somewhat impressed. "Then what colour is it?"

"And it don't seem to be exactly brown," McComas went on as if he had not heard the interruption. "Say, Henny, ain't there some colour 'tween them two shades?"

She said there was and that it was called auburn.

"Orburn," he declared. "Orburn, eh? Yeah, maybe that's it. Yeah, if that's the name of that shade, then she's got that kind of hair."

Next she waited to be told the colour of Miss Fielding's eyes. Again McComas tried to go into a trance.

"They don't appear to be blue, Henny."

"No?"

"No, sir! And they ain't real brown, neither. Wonder what they call that colour of eyes that comes 'bout half-way betwixt blue and brown?"

She was reluctant to say hazel, for Sheriff Gill had contended Miss Fielding had hazel eyes, but she said it.

"Reckon that's her!" declared McComas, much pleased. "She's got hazel eyes all right!"

"Auburn hair and hazel eyes," she mused aloud, and her own eyes lost their twinkle. "Joe, have you been talkin' with the sheriff?"

"Huh? Talkin' with Sheriff Bob?" he asked innocently.

" Sure, I stopped into his office jest a while ago to tell him I'd sold out. Jest stayed a minute. You want to talk to him, Henny? If you do I'll go tell him, seein' as how I ain't got nothin' else to do."

" No, I don't want to talk to him!" she snapped. " By the way, Joe, what do you think of that Mr. Sharon that bought your barn? Ain't he a nice sort of man?"

" He sure is!" McComas declared. " Say, that feller'll do this here town good! We need more like him. Well, I gotta be ramblin' along. Got a few little bills I want to pay up." Again he began to jingle his money as he sauntered slowly in the direction of the door.

" Wait a minute, Joe," called Mrs. Owens, " you haven't told me how old she is yet."

" Huh? Who? Oh, you mean Miss Fieldin'? Gosh, I dunno how old she is? I couldn't give you nothin' better than my own mind picture of what she's like."

" Well, what does your mind picture tell you about her age?"

" Aw, if you gotta know," he growled, " she ain't thirty yet."

" Fine!" she laughed. " And how big is she?"

" My gosh! You want to know that, too?" he grumbled. " Say, this here mind picture business is somethin' sorta intimate like. First thing I know——"

" Why, you old devil!" Mrs. Owens laughed. " You act like you were in love with her, Joe!"

The old man grinned sheepishly and confessed that if he had ever married it would have been to a girl like the one he was describing.

" Why, Joe, you slick old devil! I had no idea you were so romantic!"

" Huh! Most folks are," he told her. " Take yourself, for instance, you picked Cal Owens."

" Cal's all right," she shrugged. " Of course I picked him out. So you'd have picked out a girl with auburn hair and hazel eyes? Tell me, Joe, how tall is she and what does she weigh?"

" Aw, you make me tired, Henny! You ask so durned many questions I can't answer! Best I could do would be to make a couple of guesses for you."

" Well, I've been willing to back my guesses with hard money," she said, and her black eyes flashed.

" Sure, sure you have! But that's different. You'd spit at a crack for money, Henny."

" I sure would!" she agreed. " Come on, now, I want the rest of her! I may want to bet you a few dollars she don't look like your mind picture."

Presently she was taking notes as he grumpily gave them.

" This don't seem proper to me," he complained. " Looks

too much like was t[illegible]s here mind picture of mine."

"Oh, no," she corrected, "I'm not interested in her clothes, Joe."

"Well, if she's rich I reckon she'll wear good ones," he contended. "Likely all silks and satins and the like, with frilly laces round her neck. Huh?"

"How should I know? I told you I didn't care what she wore. Is this right?" She handed him the paper on which she had made the notes.

"Yeah, that's 'bout her in the rough," he conceded after he had examined the paper. "Now I gotta be ramblin', Henny."

She smiled, arched her dark brows.

"But I thought you wanted to back your game," she chided. "Why, Joe McComas, everybody in this town is betting on what she'll look like. And I've gone to all this trouble!"

"Well, then, I'll bet you ten she looks that away," he grumbled.

"Piker! I sure never thought you were a tinhorn, Joe!"

Reluctantly he offered to wager twenty, then fifty.

"Joe," she said, and there was pity in her eyes, "I'm disappointed in you! And you with your pockets full of dinero!"

"Aw, all right!" he agreed finally. "I'll bet you five hundred pesos she looks like that mind picture of mine! And no more, Henny Owens!"

She hurried upstairs, came down with both hands filled with double-eagles. Sight of so much gold did not surprise the old man, for he knew that—in the parlance of the frontier—the saloon and hotel were a "mint." She suggested that Peltier be made stakeholder.

"Sure!" he agreed. "I'd trust Sid anywhere, Henny. There's fools that say it ain't wise to trust no bartender, but I'd sure trust Sid Peltier!"

It was not until they had each turned five hundred dollars over to the bartender that McComas said he did not care much whether he won or lost.

"That's the spirit, Joe!" Mrs. Owens laughed her booming laugh. Her foot was on the rail, her elbow on the bar. "I always did know you were a dead game sport! A real gambler never cares much whether he wins or loses!"

"Don't made a durned bit of difference to me," he chuckled. "I don't mind tellin' you now, Henny, I got five hundred more for the livery stable business than I ever expected to get anyhow, so if I do lose that five hundred on this here bet it won't make no difference to me."

McComas left the hotel with a determination to go directly to the sheriff's office and tell Bob Gill how he had "worked

it." He had walked only a short way, however, when he began to have doubts. He stopped, screwed up his wrinkles in earnest this time.

"Now I wonder if I up and let her make a durned fool of me?" he demanded of himself. "Maybe I best pay them little bills while I got the dinero, and not say nothin' to the sheriff 'bout makin' that there bet."

CHAPTER VIII

When Bob Gill went to the livery stable he found Sharon superintending several Mexican youths in the washing of vehicles and the cleaning of harness. It was evidently the beginning of a general renovation.

Though the newcomer was coatless, he had not shed his pistol. There was about him the air of a man who wears a holstered gun as a regular and familiar part of his attire.

"Why, hallo, Sheriff," hailed Sharon. "I suppose you've heard I made an investment."

Gill said he had heard the news.

"Dirty place," laughed the new owner. "I wonder how long since McComas cleaned it out."

Gill did not answer this question because he had never seen a village stable that was very clean, and he doubted that this one would remain clean long after it was renovated. He lingered for fifteen minutes, and when he left his suspicions had not been lessened. Somehow he was certain that Sharon's arrival was associated with the expected coming of Kate Fielding.

He went a little way, then turned back.

"Looking for a job, Sheriff?" Sharon smiled.

"You'll be doing a lot of driving," said Gill. "If you need any information I'll be glad to furnish it."

This offer seemed to surprise Sharon, but he smiled quickly in appreciation of it.

"That's right, I'll have to talk to you about the roads as soon as I get things going here. This makes me feel good, Sheriff, because I was just about brought up handling horses."

They walked outside together. Sharon looked up at the big, square front of the building, said he was going to have it painted.

"Well, it could stand a coat or two," the sheriff drawled. Despite the stranger's apparent knowledge of his business, Gill felt there was much that he left unsaid. After a brief pause he ventured:

"I suppose you know Buck Blethroad?"

"Blethroad? Blethroad? Oh, yes, I've heard of him. He's the man who recently sold his ranch to the rich woman from back East, isn't he?"

Gill nodded. When he reached his office he found Hank O'Day, his chief deputy, there. O'Day was stocky, broad of shoulders, broad of brown face.

"Say, Sheriff, have you seen the flossy guinea that buys out McComas?" Hank demanded.

Gill replied that he had just come from the stable.

"What you think of him?" O'Day asked with characteristic bluntness. "That hombre's slick as an eel, Bob, or I don't know what a rattlesnake is!"

When the sheriff remained silent O'Day went on:

"He'll bear watchin', I tell you. If he'd bought a saloon or a gamblin'-house it wouldn't have surprised me, but he sure had some special reason for buyin' a livery stable. That flossy jasper's got a card in the hole."

Still Gill did not speak.

"Say, you're doin' a lot of thinkin', ain't you?" demanded the deputy. "Worried some, too?"

"A man's got to think occasionally," replied Gill.

"Well, I've got news that'll may be make you laugh," declared O'Day.

Gill became more attentive, for he thought he would hear news about Sharon.

"It's about Joe McComas," said the deputy. "I happened to be in the hotel bar when he comes in with Henny and bets five hundred on what the rich lady looks like."

"No?" said the sheriff with much more than his usual excitement. "What did he bet she looks like, Hank?"

"Can't say. They just gives Sid Peltier a slip of paper with some notes on it. I couldn't hear 'em when they was talkin' about what they wrote on the paper."

"Sid Peltier, eh?" the sheriff mused.

"Sure, Sid, he's the stakeholder."

The sheriff lapsed into thoughtful silence.

"I wish that you'd do something for me, Hank," he said presently. "Tell Sid I want to see him here to-night after he goes off shift."

"Want to take care of that dinero for him?" O'Day asked with a trace of suspicion. "He's holdin' a lot more stakes besides that thousand."

"Just tell him I'd like to see him," reiterated the sheriff. "Don't forget it, Hank. Tell him I'll be here at ten o'clock."

Gill could not help thinking there was some sort of understanding between Sharon and Mrs. Owens. He had detected the woman's sudden enmity towards himself, and now he felt that this barred him from doing what he would like to do.

"I've got a job for you, Hank," he said. "Now listen close."

O'Day, a reliable and courageous officer if not subtle, gave his whole attention. He grinned.

"Sure, I'll find out whether there's any funny business

between this flossy stranger and Henny," he declared. "One thing I'll bet, though, is when it comes to bein' slick he's no slicker than that foxy old girl herself. If there's a chance to make money she'll sure be in on it."

Innately chivalrous, Gill said he thought Mrs. Owens was naturally generous.

"Sure she is," O'Day agreed, "she'll put out a dollar any old time if she thinks it'll rope two and bring 'em in."

Though Gill did not say so, he was not ready to admit that sinister collusion between Sharon and Mrs. Owens, if it existed, was on the woman's part for the purpose of making money. Even before he had discovered her sudden enmity for himself he had been aware of her vindictive nature.

"Just keep your eyes and ears open, Hank," he ordered. "You'll have plenty of opportunities for being around the hotel. Now go and find Joe McComas. Tell him I'd like to talk with him."

McComas came soon. He had had a shave and haircut, and was grinning broadly. Gill was forced to laugh when the old man told how he had convinced Henrietta Owens that she should bet money that Kate Fielding was not auburn-haired and hazel-eyed.

"Gee whizz, Bob, I sure worked that there mind picture business to the limit. I was jeest as innercent as one of them there lambs with plenty of them there illusions, come as a feller is ready to bet on dreams he's had."

Presently the old man became less joyful.

"Say, do you think I'll win, Bob?"

"Well," said the sheriff soberly, "you won't lose."

"Won't lose?"

"You won't lose," repeated Gill.

"But I don't savvy." McComas was troubled. "If I don't lose I gotta win, ain't I?"

"You won't lose," reaffirmed the sheriff.

"Then that means I'll sure win."

"I just say you won't lose, Joe."

McComas hopped to his feet.

"Shucks! I'm goin' to get me a drink or two so's I can savvy what you mean, Bob. If I don't lose I gotta win, don't I? That's common sense, ain't it?"

The excitement caused by the announcement Miss Kate Fielding was coming to Ponderosa continued, in fact it grew as the time for her arrival drew nearer. If a man was willing to bet that she was auburn-haired he could soon find somebody who had money that said she was a decided brunette, or red-haired and old and wrinkled. Each day Hank O'Day reported to the sheriff that he had been unable to discover anything suspicious in the actions of Sharon or Mrs. Owens.

"Nothin' more'n you'd expect with him a-livin' there at

the hotel," was Hank's inevitable report. "As you know, Henny, she always lets the boarders see plenty of her."

Gill had long since realized he had made a blunder, entirely out of character, when he had told Henrietta Owens he was going to marry Miss Kate Fielding. He had done this partly in jest, partly as a barb, and perhaps partly because of wishful thinking.

From the first he had hoped that the new owner of the Bar B Bar Ranch could arrive quietly, like any ordinary traveller arriving at Ponderosa station, but he soon discovered this was not to be. He had more to worry about than Kate Fielding's coming, too. As the excitement grew there was more drinking, more carousing, which meant more fights in the saloons and the dance-hall.

All this he could handle with little help from O'Day, for he had a way of walking into a brawl and quelling it without recourse to his weapons, and seldom found it necessary even to bat a combatant over the head with his six-shooter.

Shortly after noon on Monday, O'Day came into the office with disquieting news. It was to the effect that all the men from the mines and sawmills were taking to-morrow afternoon off.

"Them fools!" the big deputy swore. "They got the idea they got to give her a public reception. That's what comes of all this here excitement and bettin' on what she'll look like when she does come."

Sheriff Bob Gill groaned and took his head between his hands.

"And I can't be here, Hank. As you know, I have to be at Cottonwood to-morrow as witness in a horse-stealing case."

"By gosh, that's right, ain't it? I'd forgot all about that case in the excitement here. You'll be back before night, won't you?"

"Yes," said Gill, "I'll be back before it's too late. You'll have to see that Miss Fielding doesn't get too bad an impression of the town, Hank."

"I'll sure try!" Hank promised. "There may be trouble round town with them lumberjacks gettin' drunk. If there's any cowboys round there may be fights, too, 'cause you know there ain't any too kind feelin' between jacks and the riders."

The sheriff was in the habit of returning to his office at ten in the evening to be there in case any business needed his attention. He had come this evening, and was about ready to make his final round of the main street before going home, when Mrs. Owens burst into the office. Her black eyes were snapping, and her face was very red.

"Now look what's happened!" she panted, as if the cool, good-looking Sheriff were entirely to blame for it, whatever it was.

"Well?" demanded Gill.

With words that snapped like the cracker of a whip, she told him Peltier had absconded with all the money he had been holding as stakeholder.

"No?" the sheriff gasped. "You don't mean Sid's vamoosed, do you?"

"Vamoosed!" she cried. "He took the westbound train this afternoon! He asked me for a few hours off! I learned just now he sneaked up to the station and climbed on to the blind side of the train! You've got to get that money back, Bob Gill!"

The sheriff regarded her coolly, yet with some amusement.

"So I have to get that money back, do I?" he drawled.

"Yes, you do! You've either got to get it back or bring Sid Peltier back so I can take it out of his thieving hide, the ornery——"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah! Or I'll have you removed from office!" she cried. "Or I'll make it so hot for you you can't stop in this town, Bob Gill! It's all because of you!"

The sheriff lifted a hand.

"Just a minute, Henny. I didn't start this wild betting about Miss Fielding's looks, did I?"

She regarded him with smouldering eyes, lip curled back from white teeth. There was a bright patch on each of her smooth cheeks.

"No, you didn't!" she cried. "But you made me mad, you with your darned detective eyes! You're sheriff here—God pity this town—and you either got to bring Sid Peltier back so I can skin him alive or bring back all that money! I don't care which!"

Gill watched so coolly and impersonally that she was ready to explode again when he said:

"I'll attend to this, Mrs. Owens."

"Mrs. Owens. When have you got so high-toned you've got to call me Mrs. Owens?"

"Mrs. Owens," he said, paying no attention to her question, "I think I can assure you that nobody is going to lose any of the money he has bet."

"He has bet?" she cried. "I'm not a he, and I've bet!"

Gill smile, shrugged, a gesture that did not relieve her fierce indignation.

"If you'll cool down I think I can assure you that nobody will lose any of the money he has bet, Mrs. Owens."

"What do you mean?"

"A successful sheriff," reminded Bob, "doesn't always tell just what he means."

"Successful sheriff!" she sneered, though she vaguely wondered why she should hate him as she did. "Successful sheriff!"

"That's it," he said, still unruffled. "And now take

this word home with you. I think I can assure you that within four or five days this money business will be straightened out."

"Then are you going to wire and have Sid Peltier arrested? You'd better!"

"Maybe."

She averted her eyes now, for she could not face his unperturbed grin. She marched to the door, a strikingly handsome figure in the black silk she usually wore. She turned.

"Sheriff Bob Gill!" she cried. "I'll give you just five days to either get Sid Peltier back here or repay every dollar of those bets!"

"Why not make it four?" Gill asked coolly.

"Then make it four! If you don't get Sid or that money back here I'll make it so darned hot for you that you'll be plenty ready to shake the dust of this burg off your feet, Sheriff! Good-night!"

CHAPTER IX

SHERIFF GILL wanted to laugh as Mrs. Owens left. He probably would have laughed but for the arrival of O'Day.

"Say, Bob, what about Peltier hittin' the grit with all that money?" demanded the deputy. "You hear about it yet?"

"I heard," said the sheriff.

"Oh, sure you did. I just met Henny goin' back towards the hotel. Wasn't she faunchin' at the bit?"

"She was a little out of sorts," agreed Gill.

"Out of sorts? She durned near accused me of stealin' her money. What you reckon becomes of Sid?"

"I really don't know, Hank. As a matter of fact I don't care a great deal."

"Huh! And you a peace officer! That's stealin' money, ain't it?"

"It can be called grand larceny and embezzlement," said the sheriff. "I'm going home pronto."

"All right, you go, and I'll try to keep 'em quiet till they quiet down on their own account. Say, Sharon has hired himself a head hostler."

As the sheriff went up the street he saw Sharon talking with a tall lean stranger in front of the Ponderosa Club. The stranger was evidently a cowboy and not a lumberman. He wore a six-shooter low at his left hip. His sombrero was drawn low over slitted eyes which showed blue in the light that came through the broad saloon window.

"Hallo there, Sheriff!" Sharon hailed. "I want you

to meet Bill Shane. Shane's going to run the stable for me. I'll have other business to tend to, likely."

As they shook hands Bill knew he was being measured by the slitted blue eyes.

"So you're the sheriff here, are you?" asked Shane. Gill smiled and nodded.

"Sort of young to be a sheriff, ain't you?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Gill answered.

"Well, I guess it don't matter much, does it?" Shane chuckled. "I've heard that sheriffs out here usually die young."

"On the average they do," Gill admitted agreeably. "Glad to have met you, Shane."

As he went on he wondered what the man had meant. Shane certainly did not look like a man who worked in a livery stable. The holstered Colt was worn too low, and the end of the cut-out holster was fastened with a metal pin that probably would have been invisible to eyes less keen than those of the sheriff.

Gill went through the hotel bar, which he found to be noisy and packed with lumberjacks and cowboys and ranchers. Though the games were going full blast, he did not hear any one who wanted to bet on the probable appearance of Miss Kate Fielding.

Entering the lobby, the sheriff found Mrs. Owens the centre of a crowd almost as noisy as that in the bar, but she was making most of the noise. She was expressing a vehement opinion of Sid Peltier.

"Hey there, Bob!" called McComas, who had been trying to get in a word. "What you know about this? That son-of-a-gun of a slick bartender, he elopes with my five hundred dollars!"

"And with mine, too!" cried Mrs. Owens, and her black eyes blazed.

Apparently there was not a man in the lobby who had not posted a bet with Peltier.

"We're going to hang that skunk when we get him!" one man declared.

"Hang him?" cried the woman. "If I get hold of him I'll take his hide off in little strips! Yes, I will!"

"Oh, I guess the sheriff will bring Sid back," said Cal Owens, who was the quietest member of the little crowd.

"I think I'll get him," agreed Gill calmly.

"Get him? When?" demanded Mrs. Owens.

"Say, you think you can fetch back the durned thief?" asked McComas.

Mrs. Owens swept men aside until she could face the sheriff.

"I tell you you'd better bring Sid back!" she declared loudly. "I'm mad about that money! He had more than nine hundred dollars of my money, Bob Gill, and I mean to get it back!"

The other bettors began to clamour, too, for the sheriff to go after Peltier and their money.

"And what have you done about it?" Mrs. Owens cried. "Did you send a telegram for him to be arrested? Did you? He took the afternoon train out of here; we found that out. He sneaked to the blind side of the train and climbed on before it left!"

To Bob Gill it was incredible that all this excitement and turmoil could have been caused by an Eastern woman's purchase of a cattle ranch.

"Maybe," he drawled.

"Maybe what?" snapped Mrs. Owens.

"Maybe I wired the officers on West," the sheriff told her languidly. "I just don't remember, Henny. I've been plenty busy to-day."

"Well, for heaven's sake!" she cried. "You don't remember! That's sure like you, Bob Gill! All you do is grin and look wise!"

"Now, now," broke in McComas, "don't be too hard on him, Henny. We all know he's a fust-rate sheriff even if he don't make a lot of noise about it."

"First-rate sheriff!" she sneered. "If he don't find Sid Peltier and get my money back I'll make this town so hot for him he'll burn his lazy feet!"

To the surprise of the others, Gill laid a firm hand on the woman's shoulder.

"Well?" she demanded. "Now what, some more of your riddles?"

"No riddle this time," the sheriff said, still unruffled. "You just watch out that this town doesn't get so hot that it blisters the bottoms of your feet, Henny."

She paled, then stared at him for a moment. When she seemed about to explode into violent words she whirled and marched regally to the stairs. As she climbed them she took with her a hatred for the sheriff that was even fiercer than she had felt before, but she could neither bully nor understand him.

There was silence in the lobby until she was out of sight, her stiff black taffeta swishing as she gained the upper landing.

"By gosh, Sheriff," Owens said with a laugh, "I sure wish I could make her take water like that. Never could, never could."

"Oh, that's the way Bob handles all the bad ones," McComas said with loyalty still unshaken. "Onct I saw him jest look at a feller down in the club, and instead of killin' another feller, that feller jest pokes his pistol right back into its holster. You recollect that time, don't you, Bob?"

"I don't believe I do, Joe," said the sheriff. "Now good-night. I'm going home to grab a little sleep. I have to ride to Cottonwood to-morrow."

" Huh ? You won't be here to-morrer, Bob ?" McComas gasped. " To-morrer's the day that there rich gal's comin !"

The sheriff did not reply, but sauntered out, taking with him new worries and a more acute regret that he was not to be here all day to-morrow. He had to go as principal witness for the State in the preliminary hearing of Haskins, alleged horse-thief, because he, the sheriff, had arrested Haskins with the horse he was accused of having stolen from the Bottle Branch Ranch in Long Sage Valley.

" Damn it !" he muttered, " I wish I had sent word down there to postpone that hearing !"

To reach the small cottage where he lived alone, Gill had to turn a corner beyond which scant illumination went from the dim light of the main street. He was more than ever certain that there was some well-planned conspiracy afoot, and that it centred about Miss Fielding. Whether Mrs. Owens was an actual conspirator he did not know.

" It's possible she joined just to even scores with me," he told himself, thinking charitably of the woman.

He was so engrossed in his troubled thoughts that he barely knew when he turned the dark corner. Then he was roughly jostled, and a man snarled :

" What the hell you mean by tryin' to walk over me ? Why don't you look where you're goin', you——"

In a flash the sheriff recognized the voice. It was that of Shane, the man he had seen with Sharon. There was enough light for Gill to see the man's hand move towards a pistol.

" All right, let's go to it," the sheriff said.

" Bet your damned life ! So you want to walk over me again !"

As Shane drew the sheriff struck, the barrel of his forty-four hitting the other man's wrist. Shane uttered a growl of pain and surprise. Then the weapon slipped from his fingers.

Gill, a quiet man normally, but violent when fully roused, was not content with having disarmed the fellow, who had evidently been waiting for him. He struck again, this time making the barrel of his weapon collide with the left side of Shane's head. Shane hit the board walk with a thud.

Sheriff Gill raked a match across his pants leg. He held its flame above the face of the prone man for a brief moment.

" Shane all right, if that's his name," he muttered, and whisked out the flame. Another look told him the would-be killer was not seriously hurt and that he would probably begin to revive within a few minutes.

As Gill walked slowly homeward without any thought that he should have dragged Shane off to jail, it was with still another worry in his mind.

" I didn't think they would try to get me this soon," he

said as he neared his [illegible] house. "In fact I didn't think they would try to get me at all. There must be something big behind all this."

Before lighting the lamp the sheriff drew all the blinds in the big comfortable living-room, whose walls were lined with book-shelves and whose floor was liberally sprinkled with Navajo rugs.

After he had made a light he kindled a fire in the big fire-place. He took a drink of brandy and sat down before the fire to try to do some cogent thinking.

"Kate Fielding," he mused aloud as he stared into the flames. "Kate Fielding." He tried to picture her as she sped westward towards he knew not what.

In his troubled musings he gave little time to thoughts of Shane. The fellow had revived within a few minutes, as the sheriff had expected. He had scrambled to his feet, standing dazed and groggy for a few minutes before full re-collection came back to him.

He was surprised to discover that his pistol was in its holster, more surprised than he was to find that he was not locked in a cell. He grasped the handle of the weapon and peered into the blackness in the direction he thought Gill would have taken.

"I wonder where that——went?" he asked himself.

Hearing footsteps that could have been those of the man he had been after, he slouched towards the livery stable, which was dark except for a thin horizontal ribbon of light in its upper story. He groped towards the stairway, began to climb slowly towards the room from which the light came.

CHAPTER X

The upstairs room showed evidence of hasty and incom-plete cleaning. The walls were still littered with old gear, dusty saddles, crocked and brittle harness. Some robes into which dirt was ground too deeply for removal lay in a pile against one fly-specked wall.

Near the middle of the room, lighted by a stable lantern, two men sat beside a table on which were tinned sardines, soda crackers, a slice of cheese, and two bottles of beer.

The men ceased eating and became alert when they heard steps on the stairs. They looked at each other, but asked only mute questions, though both shifted as if to be better able to reach the pistols at their hips.

The older was blocky of face, sorrel of beard and moustache and hair, and with protruding amber eyes. The other was smooth of face and lean, with eyes so pale they looked chalky. He had a receding chin, a high, hooped nose, a slit of a mouth.

"What the hell ?" that younger man whispered.

"Nothin' to be alarmed about, kid," advised the other. "Likely somebody that savvies we're here."

"If it's some damned officer that's found out——"

Their grim tension relaxed as the door opened and Shane stood there. He closed the door after a moment.

"Say, what's wrong ?" Red Kirby demanded. "You look like you'd been hit hard, Bill."

Shane removed his hat, showed the welt on the side of his head. His face looked pale and venomous.

"Say, what'd you run into ?" Kid Rigdon wanted to know. He laughed almost noiselessly.

"Run into ?" Shane snarled. "Yeah, I runs into a gun barrel !"

They looked at his hurt, told him the scalp was not cut much.

"She's just oozin' a little blood," said Kirby. "It'll soon clot on the hair."

Shane sat down, drank from one of the beer bottles.

"What happened ?" Rigdon demanded. "Run into somethin' ?"

An evil, cunning grin came to Shane's face.

"It was the damned sheriff !" he snarled. "He tried to walk square over me. When I argued he got tough."

The derision in the eyes of the others told plainly enough that they did not believe him. Shane shrugged, cursed.

"Aw, I might as well tell the straight of it to you two ! I tried to work the old injured-party game, and make him draw."

"Yeah," interrupted Rigdon, and again laughed his silent laugh, "and he drawed."

"Not the way I figured he would," Shane corrected angrily. "I figured he'd shoot, and that'd give me plenty time to drill him from the hip. But he swipes out his hog-leg and slams me across the wrist. Look at this damned bump ! It hurts. Then he slams me alongside the cabeza. There, you fellers got it the way it happened !"

As if they had learned all they wanted to learn, Kirby and Rigdon looked back at their food. Instead of eating, however, they began to curse.

"After ridin' forty miles to get here, we have stuff like this set out for us to eat !" grumbled Rigdon as he brushed sardine tins to the floor. "Why the hell ain't we supposed to go to a eatin' house to eat ?"

Yeah, that's what I'd like to know !" added Kirby.

Shane insolently rolled and lit a cigarette, then grinned at the two angry faces.

"Sure, go right down to some eatin' house and eat," he taunted. "There ain't an officer in this town that'd recognize either of you. Oh, no !"

The newcomers, wanted outlaws, knew they dared not show themselves. In obedience to orders Shane had relayed to them, they had ridden into Ponderosa after dark and reached the livery stable by a side street. Still following orders, they had climbed to the dirty room where they had found the food and the drink waiting.

"Say, who's backin' this game, Bill?" Kirby wanted to know now.

"Never mind who's backin' it," Shane snarled. "What counts is that there's goin' to be big money in it!"

"Well, by hell, I always like to know who pays me big money," Rigdon grumbled.

"Huh! I ain't quite that pertickler," dissented Kirby as his amber eyes twinkled. "What I do want to see, though, is the colour of his dinero before I get into any man's risky game."

From a buckskin purse so long and well filled that it could have been used as a deadly blackjack, Shane poured gold money on to the table. He stacked double-eagles until he had ten in each of two piles. One pile he shoved towards Kirby, the other towards the now pop-eyed Rigdon.

"There's a couple of hundred apiece for you fellers," Shane said. "You get three hundred apiece more if this thing works out as per schedule."

Kirby pocketed his gold. Rigdon toyed with his like a gambler debating on what to bet.

"Say, who's backin' this here game, Bill?" he demanded. "I said I didn't care, but this is more money'n I seen since that time us three holds up the El Reno Bank."

Shane did not reply, but tensed as if listening.

"Just a horse stompin' down there," said Rigdon.

"I guess so," Shane growled. "But what's the use mentionin' that El Reno business?"

"Aw, Bill, look here," Rigdon whined now. "Us three's been pardners in more'n one deal, and we orter trust each other. Who's backin' this here game?"

Despite his throbbing head, Shane grinned cunningly.

"Suppose I'm behind it," he suggested.

"Yeah, you are!" Rigdon sneered.

"Huh!" Kirby declared profanely. "There's brains backin' this here game."

"Don't forget the money, Reg," Rigdon enjoined. "It looks to me like there was a bank backin' it."

Again Shane smiled cunningly.

"There's big money back of it," he confessed.

"Anybody we know?" demanded Kirby.

"Nobody you two knows."

"But, say," Rigdon snickered, "how'd you run across him?"

Shane carefully said that perhaps the backer of the "game" was not a man.

"Hell!" ejaculated Rigdon. "You don't mean that a skirt's back of this game with plenty dinero, do you?"

"Well, if he does mean that, what difference does it make?" Kirby asked as he jingled the unexpected gold in a pocket. "Money, she sure talks plenty loud with me."

Shane told him he had had a run of luck just when he had been down to his uppers.

"Come across an old friend," he added. "Amigo I met in the pen. You fellers orter know a man meets some smart guys in the pen, slick hombres."

Kirby and Rigdon nodded ruefully, but their eyes were bright with interest.

"Well, this hombre, I ain't tellin' you no names because you two wouldn't know him anyhow—well, he asks me do I want to set into a little game here where there's a fat chance to drag down a few thousand. So I say I do, bein' down to my last peso."

Rigdon and Kirby asked now why they had been sent for. Again Shane drank from a bottle of beer. He tossed the empty bottle to the floor.

"Couple of good, honest, reliable men was needed," he said. "So I tells my amigo about you two and gets the order to send for you, bein' as I know just about where to find you."

They agreed to tackle any job, no matter what its risks provided it promised quick money. They had been on the dodge for months. Shane began to tell what they were to do, but Kirby thumped the table with his fist.

"Say, I ain't goin' to talk no more business till I get some decent grub! This here's all right when there ain't nothin' better close by, but we're in a town now!"

"And we ain't had nothin' since breakfast, and durned little then," Rigdon added, and licked dry lips.

Shane pointed out that it was not safe for the men to go to a restaurant. Their pictures and descriptions were on too many reward notices with information that they were wanted for robbery of a Santa Fe train.

"Well, there ain't no reason why you can't get us a meal, Bill," Rigdon protested. "You done your stretch and they don't want you here or anywhere else."

Desperate and cold-blooded though he was, Shane shrank from confessing that he did not want another meeting with the sheriff of Ponderosa. He said:

"Huh! If I go into some eatin' house the first thing they'll see is how I been slammed in the head."

Having lived on very short rations for weeks and having even eaten burro meat, Kirby and Rigdon were so intent on getting at least one full meal that they refused to accept Shane's excuses.

"Pull your hat down over that there bump and nobody'll even notice it," Kirby ordered.

" Yeah, it was that hat that keeps your head from bein' cut bad," added Rigdon.

Shane grimaced, and rubbed his head gingerly.

" Well, this here sombrero don't keep 'em from hurtin'," he growled. " All right, I suppose I'll have to go and see if I can hustle you tenderfeet some grub."

The new comers let this slur pass unnoticed.

" See as how you fetch plenty of hot java !" Kirby instructed.

" And a bottle of whisky ! It'll sure be appreciated," said the youngest of the outlaws.

" Yeah," Rigdon nodded. " And if you don't come back pronto we'll go out and get somethin' ourselves !"

They had little to say during the half-hour Shane was gone. When he returned he brought a pot of coffee, a pot of savoury stew, a loaf of bread. He had a quart of whisky in a side pocket.

" Got this stuff from a greaser eatin' house," he explained. " It's down close to the red-lights, so nobody'd notice."

After taking long drinks from the bottle, Kirby and Rigdon ate ravenously. Meanwhile Shane drew a rough map and explained it to them.

" Say, how come you know this country so durned well ?" Rigdon demanded suspiciously.

" Used to punch cows here when I was a kid," Shane grinned. " Ain't seen a soul here as remembers me to-day."

Kirby's yellowish eyes narrowed.

" You say you used to punch cattle here ?" he said insolently. " You sure you didn't mean steal cattle, Bill ?"

" Oh, never mind about that," Shane laughed. " Now get this right in your minds, boys. It's this point here. The roads and trails in this part of the country ain't hard to follow if you got a map like this one, but there mustn't be no slips."

Kirby stopped wolfing food, took the sketch, studied it.

" This here looks plain enough, Bill. This here line meant to be the wagon trail to east of that mountainrange we seen with the snow on 'er ?"

" Keep to the east of the peaks and you can't get lost," Shane said, and though he thought the map plain enough he continued to give directions and information until the two had mopped up the last of the gravy with hunks of bread.

" Now you fellers turn in and grab some shut-eye," he told them. " You'll have to be a good piece out of town before day comes, that is if you don't want to run the risk of havin' some durned John Law recognize you."

Throughout the night Bob Gill sat beside his fire, occasionally feeding if fresh wood. Sometimes he mused pleasurably, and at other times sadly. More often, however,

he hated himself because he could not puzzle out the conspiracy he knew to exist, while all the time he regretted the official business that was to take him away from Ponderosa to-morrow, the day Kate Fielding was to arrive.

To Cottonwood and back was a ride of eighty miles, and he knew he could not make it, give his testimony and return to Ponderosa before the late afternoon train made its brief stop and rushed on towards the West.

Two hours before dawn he was roused from drowsy reverie by the tramp of horses, and told himself that cowboys were arriving early for the day of celebration.

" No," he quickly corrected himself, " they're coming from the wrong direction."

Rising, he shoved the table with the lamp on it to where it would be in line with the front door, which was perhaps forty feet from the middle of the street. Then timing the hoofbeats until he reasoned they were in front of the house, he jerked open the door and stepped outside and to the right into the shadow.

Though the picture he got of two strange men on two strange horses was a dim one, he thought he would not forget them.

" Hell, I wonder who that early bird is," one of the riders growled.

" Dunno," said the other. " Come on."

They used their spurs and were soon out of the radius of the light.

An hour later, after a breakfast he cooked himself. Sheriff Bob Gill was headed for Cottonwood, a direction opposite that the strange early riders had taken.

CHAPTER XI

Ponderosa slept as late as it could that cold Tuesday morning. The snow was half-way down the timbered mountainside, but there was not a cloud in the sky. Collectively the town yawned grumbled, drank and felt better. However, it was still in the mood to hand the absconding Peltier had he been found.

" And to make it worse," Mrs. Owens complained, " that worthless sheriff ain't here! He's gone to Cottonwood on that horse-stealin' trial, as if horse-stealin' is more important than us having our money stolen!"

" Oh, I suppose we can get along without him," remarked Jim Sharon, who was going in to breakfast.

" Get along without him? We'd been better off if we hadn't ever had him!"

" He doesn't seem such a bad fellow," Sharon said. " Sort of quiet. I wonder if he has much sand?"

"Sand?" the woman's eyes flashed "Why, Bob Gill would crawl if a coyote looked cockeyed at him!"

Though Sharon smiled at her angry vehemence, he eyed her shrewdly.

"Sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure about it! Why, I could make him crawl myself if I took a notion to! Yes, I've a notion to show him up!"

In the dining-room Sharon found Shane almost ready to leave.

"What's wrong with the side of your head?" the new stable owner inquired in surprise.

"Ah," growled Shane, "I just hit a neck-yoke."

"Yes? Sure the neck-yoke didn't hit you?"

"I'm not dead sure of that," Shane admitted.

Sharon shrugged, asked whether things at the stable were running smoothly.

"There ain't a hitch anywhere," Shane returned. "Come down after a while and look things over."

He went out. Sharon looked after him, puzzled.

"Neck-yoke, eh?" he muttered softly as he went to his usual table.

By noon the town was really waking. By two the saloons and the main street were filled with lumberjacks and saw-mill men. Cowboys were beginning to arrive from the several ranches in the grass country below the timber.

Hank O'Day and old John Evans, the marshal, had their hands full keeping the peace. Men were eager to fight because they had little else to do.

"Hell!" growled the head sawyer from the Mankins mill. "When's that there train a-comin' in? I bet forty dollars she's old and wrinkled and has store teeth!"

He was told that the westbound train should be in at four-ten. Presently word came from the station that the train was running late because of a storm and a washout east of Dennison.

This was news Mrs. Owens received with glee, because it meant that Miss Kate Fielding might have to remain overnight in Ponderosa. She found Sharon in the bar, which was jammed to its noisy capacity. She caught his sleeve.

"Let's get out of here."

In the lobby, which was much quieter, she told him the train was late. Sharon scowled, suppressed a curse.

"That's hard luck. It'll be dark before she gets in."

"Well, what of it? You know it'd be a shame to start out even at four o'clock with that tenderfoot girl on that long, cold trip, Mr. Sharon."

He called her attention to the telegram in which Miss Fielding had announced that she wanted to start for her ranch as soon as she arrived on the train.

Even though the train was late, the station yard and platform were packed with men and women by four o'clock. They made a colourful throng, the woodsmen in gaudy mackinaws, the cowboys in their best. Some of the latter rode about, making their horses prance and curvette. Whisky bottles and flasks circulated among the crowd. There was a good deal of betting, for every man who had had pay coming had drawn it especially for this gala occasion.

"Ten dollars she's a grass-widder with yaller hair and green eyes!" a sawmill man yelled.

"Here you are! I'll take that bet!" shouted a cowboy. "I bet she's skinny and old and has got black eyes the same as that stout lady over at the hotel!"

Every minute or so somebody went into the warm station for news. At four-thirty a man came out and announced loudly:

"She's pickin' up time, accordin' to what the operator just tells me!"

Now there was betting on the time of the train's arrival, for this had taken on ponderous and important proportions.

"Here you two, stop that!" Hank O'Day shouted as he shoved two belligerents apart. "I'll jail the whole damned outfit if there's much more fightin' and cussin'!"

"Aw, we was just arguin' over what she looks like," explained one of the belligerents.

"Well, you don't need to fight about it!" O'Day snarled as he hurried to break up another battle in its incipient stage.

News that the train had picked up half an hour brought cheers. It brought more flasks into circulation, too.

"She'll be hittin' the long grade soon," a man said. "Then we'll hear her snort!"

Mrs. Owens arrived in the hotel back, accompanied by Sharon. The latter wore a linen duster over his blue serge, and carried fringed gauntlets, as the owner of a prosperous livery business should.

Mrs. Owens wore black silk and a black felt hat that added to her handsomeness and gave her a look of matronly reliability and charm. She was as sedate as if she were the wife of Ezra Shawn, the only minister in Ponderosa.

A grim suspense dropped over the throng. Then a man yelled: "She's a-comin'!"

There was a surge of humanity towards the tracks, a craning of necks and turning of eyes to eastward.

"Hell!" a man swore. "She's just hittin' the foot of the grade out of Dennison Valley. I can just hear her beginnin' to snort."

With laborious, ever louder puffings the long train climbed the winding grade. Men who had never before been agitated were excited now, and did not ask themselves the reason now. Women, to whom this was to be an eventful day, shivered and tittered, but not because of the cold.

"Why, Sadie, I feel just like I was goin' to be married!" one girl whispered. "It's the funniest feelin'!"

"Oh, I know how it feels," returned Sadie. "I been married twice already."

"I'm just dyin' to see what she looks like" said a woman in another group. "I know she'll be pretty and romantic. If she is I'll be tickled to death, for Sam, he bet me a dollar she'd be old and rheumatic."

"She won't have rheumatism if she's comin' out here to run a big cattle ranch," declared another woman whose round face was glowing with excitement.

"Well, I don't see why she can't run a cow ranch with rheumatism!" declared another woman. "This climate'll do her good. Look at me! When I come here I was so stiff in the joints—"

"Say! I don't hear 'er snortin' no more!" a man yelled. "Don't hear 'er a-tall! She's topped the grade!"

"And if she's snooty and high-toned," decided a woman in another group ignoring the shout, "I'm not goin' to like her a-tall!"

"Well, then, likely you won't like her," retorted her companion. "Most of them rich Easterners are snooty and high-toned, 'specially the women."

"Oh, look at Mrs. Owens! Ain't she just lovely in the black silk?"

"Huh! It fits too soon, I'd say."

"Well, it is a little snug, but it sure shows off her form."

"Form indeed! Well, she's got plenty of it to show off. I never did like that woman, or trust her either. She goes into the hotel saloon and drinks just like a man!"

"Maybe she does that just to make business."

"Huh! She does it to make money. Don't you make no mistake about that. Yes, I do think that little black hat of hers with the simple black feather is just too cute and 'propriate for anything, Annie. She sure does know how to wear her clothes no matter how she gets 'em."

"Yes, she's in perfect harmony all over, Jennie."

"Yes, all over, but how about inside? I heard tell that she treats Cal Owens something awful!"

Unaware of what was being said about her, not that it would have made any difference just now if she had known, Mrs. Owens walked slowly up and down the space near the tracks with Sharon attentive at her side.

"Say, I'll bet she makes a fool out of that fellow that bought out Joe McComas before she's through with him," Sadie sniffed.

"Maybe," said Jennie hesitantly as she looked at Sharon. "But he's awful handsome, ain't he? I can see how she's 'tracted to him."

"Attracted! Say, I don't see how Cal Owens puts up

with the way she carries on with men! Of course I don't know that she's ever done anything that's exactly wrong, but just the same——"

"Yonder she comes! Yonder she comes!" yelled a mounted cowboy as he began unconsciously to loose his rope. "I see her headlights!"

Though it was only early dusk, a faint illumination was feeling its way swiftly along the rails, which were tingling with far-off vibrations. Another silence gripped the eager, waiting crowd. Some of the women, actually frightened, felt as if they wanted to hurry home, but stood their ground. Some of the men wished for further stimulant to successfully face the ordeal of Miss Fielding's arrival, but all the bottles were empty now and there was not time to go for full ones.

"My lord, Sadie!" Jennie gasped. "What'll we do if she ain't on this train?"

"If she ain't on it?" Jennie gasped, then sighed and felt weak. "If she ain't we'll sure be a awful lot of fools, won't we?"

Seldom in the history of Western railroading had the arrival of single train been the cause of so much eager excitement. To the people of Ponderosa the arrival of any passenger train was an event, but the coming of this one was something to be remembered and passed on to the grandchildren.

"Oh, I'm so nervous I can't stand still!" whispered one woman. "I'm so afraid she's goin' to be old and skinny with a lantern jaw like Liza Fitts!"

"My, I hope she ain't!" her companion moaned. "I want her to be nice and handsome so I can copy her Eastern styles. I can make any dress just like it if I only set eyes on it. Do you suppose she'll wear silk or organdie?"

"Organdie at this time of year? And with snow' most down to the sawmills! I'm about to freeze to death, Josephine!"

"Yes, that's right, I'm shiverin' all over myself, only I didn't know it," admitted Josephine. "I hope she wears red silk. I'm so fond of red, and when it's cut stylish——"

Past the picturesque throng the big engine rushed, dragging its mail, baggage and express cars, its day coaches. With the tourist and standard sleepers that followed it seemed half a mile long.

"Oh, I'm afraid it ain't goin' to stop at all!" a woman groaned. "Yes, yes it is! It's goin' to take water at the tank yonder!"

Sickening, sheepish disappointment began to grip that portion of the crowd that was sober. Had it been hoaxed? The smoker and the day coaches disgorged loads in which there was nothing unusual, for they were mostly woodsmen looking for work. There was Curly Davis, who had been to Dennison to see his sweetheart. There was old Mrs.

Fogarty, who had been to Albuquerque to see an ailing aunt. Then there was Sam Jacobs, returning from a business trip to Kansas City.

" Huh ! She wouldn't ride in them cheap cars !" whispered Sadie.

" Of course not, her bein' rich," agreed Jennie. " [illegible] likely take a whole Pullman."

Old Joe McComas, excited though he was, had actually kept sober. Now he thought he had a thought which he had not got without inspiration.

" Durn it !" he muttered. " I see it all now. This here is another one of Bob Gill's kind of jokes ! This explains why he ain't here himself, by gosh !"

Mrs. Owens, as excited as the old man, stood near enough to hear his muttered words. She bit at her lip and was pale under her powder, but her eyes smouldered.

" Mr. Sharon," she demanded, turning to the still attentive owner of the livery stable, " do you suppose she wasn't on this train ?"

Sharon did not let worry or doubt mar his usual composure.

" She telegraphed she would be on it," he reminded. " So far I have seen no reason to make me suspect that she has changed her mind."

" But just the same——" began Mrs Owens. She had to grip her lip cruelly between her teeth to keep back explosive, angry words. Sheriff Bob Gill was out of town, wasn't he ? Of course he had said he was going to Cottonwood, but hadn't he managed somehow to take Miss Kate Fielding off this train at Dennison or some other station to eastward ?

CHAPTER XII

Some of the crowd began to move sheepishly away. Others cursed themselves and the person who had duped them.

" Wha's this bane all 'bout ?" a big Swede lumberjack mumbled thickly. " What we all come here for anyvay ?"

The majority lingered, however, breathless lest the train resume its journey. It was about to do just that when the door of one of the Pullman vestibules opened and a darky clambered down with bags in hand.

" Oh, she must be comin' now !" gasped Jenny. " A rich lady'd always have one of them niggers to tote her baggage !"

" Well, it's about time she showed up !" remarked Sadie. " I know now what she looks like."

Mrs. Owens' sharp black eyes saw a lady following the

coloured porter, and heaved such a breath of relief that she forgot all about her new-found hatred of Sheriff Bob Gill for the moment.

"Why, that must be her now, Mr. Sharon."

Sharon, watching the trim figure in the blue woollen dress, barely nodded.

"But she's young, Mr. Sharon," Mrs. Owens reminded, remembering that she had wagered much on the age and appearance of this woman.

The crowd had become so silent now that it might have thought it sacrilege to speak in the presence of the lady at whom they stared and gaped. What they saw was a slender young woman in an expensive suit of blue with a small blue turban on her head.

"Durned if she ain't a looker all right!" muttered an old cattleman from Cienaga Grande. "But what the hell's she goin' to do with a cow ranch in this here country?"

Many of the ones who had not drunk too much were asking themselves this same question.

Whether or not the woman at whom they were staring was Kate Fielding, she certainly had poise. She gave the crowd a look that had in it a small smile of appreciation with perhaps a little mirth, then resumed her way, the porter at her side.

There was no claiming that Henrietta Owens lacked poise herself. She had come to meet a middle-aged lady of ample means and possibly ample proportions. Now she saw instead a lady who seemed not long out of her teens, and slender and beautiful, but she gave no sign that she was surprised or disappointed. She did not hurry to meet her prospective guest, but walked with a stately dignity and little haste. Sharon would have travelled faster, for sight of the girl had quickened his pulses, especially since he, as a man of business, had plausible excuse for addressing her.

The train was beginning to move now. The porter handed the girl the smaller of her bags, setting the others upon the ground. Sharon was about to inform her that he was the reliable liveryman to whom she had telegraphed when Mrs. Owens said:

"I am Mrs. Owens of the Montzuma Hotel. You are Miss Kate Fielding?"

Hazel eyes gave the woman a steady yet smiling look.

"Darn her!" Mrs. Owens muttered back of her teeth. "She has got auburn hair! Just wait till I get hold of Bob Gill and tell him of the skin-game he worked on me!"

Unwilling to remain far away, old Joe McComas grinned from ear to ear and momentarily forgot the five hundred dollars of his money with which Sid Peltier had absconded.

"Tee-hee! Durned if my mind picture of her wasn't jest about kerrect! Funny how a feller gets mind pictures, ain't it?"

"Yes, I am Kate Fielding," the newcomer said to Mrs. Owens in a soft, slightly throaty voice. "I had expected a livery rig to meet me here at the train."

"But it's very late to start on a long cold ride, Miss Fielding," Mrs. Owens said with motherly concern and a motherly smile. "If you will allow me—this is Mr. Sharon, the liveryman."

Kate Fielding looked at Sharon, and the surprise on her pretty face showed plainly that she had not expected such a handsome liveryman or one so well-dressed and urbane, despite the pistol holster that showed below his coat where the linen duster was open in front.

"I shall leave the time of start entirely to you, Miss Fielding," Sharon said. "If you are ready to start now——".

The girl looked into the gathering night through which the snowy mountains were visible. She smiled, then shivered a little as she became aware of the cold wind that came down from the snow. She said:

"Will it be this cold at—at my ranch ?"

"Oh, no," Mrs. Owens declared. "It will be warm out there. It's much lower than it is here in Ponderosa."

"That's fine !" Kate Fielding exclaimed, merriment making her eyes dance. "I like to be where I can see the snow, but I don't want to have to live in it."

Sharon, who had picked up the bags, told her that the climate at the Bar B Bar was fine, winter or summer. Mrs. Owens shot him a suspicious look, wondering how he knew so much about the ranch.

"By gosh, that gal's sure a thoroughbred," decided the cattleman from Cienaga Grande, "even if she ain't got no business tryin' to run cows away out here."

Though Mrs. Owens was anxious for the newcomer to spend at least one night in her hotel, she said little more. Finally Kate Fielding said she would wait until morning to make the start to her ranch.

"I really think you are right," Sharon agreed. "After all, it is a long, dark ride, Miss Fielding."

Without taking the lead with her usual brusque forcefulness, Mrs. Owens had nevertheless led the way to the hotel hack.

"I must warn you now, my dear," she said, "that you will not find accommodations here with the comforts and conveniences you have been accustomed to, but we have the best there is."

"Which will be quite all right," Miss Fielding agreed as if she were accustomed to the best wherever she went, as a matter of course.

Though Sharon had brought a rig and a fine team in order to be ready in case his passenger wanted to leave immediately for her ranch, it was he who put her bags into the

hack. As Mrs. Owens moved aside to allow the girl to step into the hack she felt a touch on her arm. She turned quickly and saw the grinning visage of Joe McComas.

"Tee-hee!" he whispered exultantly. "She's got orburn hair and them eyes like I said she had!"

Mrs. Owens' own eyes flashed.

"You go to hell!" she hissed at him. "You haven't won any more on her than I have anyway."

Mrs. Owens turned away from the old man quickly after this whispered outburst, and was all dignity and motherly concern as she took her seat opposite her guest in the hack.

"Then I shall see you to-morrow, Miss Fielding," Sharon said, touching the rim of his expensive Stetson. "What time shall be make the start?"

Kate Fielding frowned a little as if she were slightly perplexed.

"At eight," she said. "Yes, we shall start at eight."

As the hack rolled away, with Mose, the hotel roust-about, skilfully handling the lines, Sharon moved towards his own rig, which had been held by an Indian. He stopped when McComas gripped his arm.

"Say, what you think of her now?" demanded the man who had formerly owned the stable.

"Rather pretty girl," said Sharon curtly.

"Sure, sure. But you figure she knows how to run cattle?"

"How should I know?" Sharon growled. "I'm not her guardian." He climbed impatiently into the rig and drove to the stable, where he turned the team over to one of the Mexican hostlers as Shane appeared from the little room that was used as harness-room and office.

"Say, ain't you goin' out to-night?" Shane asked. "Didn't she come?"

Minus the poise he could assume when he needed it, Sharon rushed into the office, Shane at his heels.

"Shut the damned door!" he growled. "No, I ain't goin' out till to-morrow morning! Oh, she showed up all right!"

"Not till to-morrow morning?" Shane repeated. His eyes were slitted and hard in his disappointment. "I suppose——"

Sharon took a cigarette from a pack, tore it to bits, flung the bits to the floor. He paced to and fro, cursing.

"Say, this beats hell, don't it?" Shane growled.

"It sure does!" Sharon admitted. "Well, it's got to be straightened out."

The perversity of something which is often called fate frequently keeps the most carefully laid plans from running smoothly to their ends, be they good or evil. This time it was blocky, square-jawed Hank O'Day who appeared in the broad entrance of the stable, just as Shane,

muffled in a large sheepskin coat and mounted on a good horse, rode out.

"Why, hallo, Shane," hailed the chief deputy. "You look like you was startin' out for a long ride."

Quickly suppressing his sudden rage, Shane explained that he had to go for some horses that were in a pasture Sharon had leased.

"Damn such a boss anyway!" he added. "He says I got to ride out and wrangle in his broncs at this time of night and in this cold!"

"What's the matter, got a rush order for another team?" O'Day asked blandly.

"Yeah, it's that girl as buys that ranch. She wants a team to take her out in the mornin'."

"Well, what's wrong with them four the boss had at the train a while ago?" O'Day persisted. "They looked like about the best four I've seen here for quite a while."

"Oh, I don't know what's wrong with 'em!" Shane swore and spurred his horse to a gallop. As he disappeared into the cold night he was followed by a speculative look.

"I sure don't know of any pasture out in that direction," the deputy told himself. "'Course there may be one. Guess I'll amble up to the hotel and make sure Henny is bein' hospitable to the lady."

He was nearing the hotel when he was stopped by McComas. The old man seemed to have lost all his glee now.

"Hank," he begged, "you got any idea what becomes of Sid Peltier? I'd like to have that—back now, seein' as I called that lady to a turn and wins my five hundred from Henny."

"Joe, you'd just as well kiss that five hundred adios," O'Day laughed. Then he said seriously: "Say, wasn't you close to them three when they got into the hack at the station a while ago?"

"I sure was!" the old man declared, grinning. "I just wanted to tell Henny as how her mind picture of that there gal wasn't worth a damn compared to mine."

O'Day listened patiently to the old man's pleased yarn, which ended: "And she told me to go to hell, same as I figured she would. She wanted orful to spit in my face, Hank, but she couldn't do it 'cause she had to put on airs for that there rich gal."

Finally O'Day asked whether he had heard Miss Fielding say she was dissatisfied with the team Sharon had hitched to the heavy spring-wagon.

"With that there team?" the old man demanded in surprise. "Say, them's the best four I had in the barn! It was me as tells Sharon to drive her out with 'em! Why?"

"Are you sure about this, Joe?" asked the deputy.

"Sure? 'Course I am! There wasn't no mention a-tall of her not likin' them four horses, Hank."

" There wasn't, eh ?"

" No, there wasn't ! Why you askin', anyhow ?"

" Oh, I thought that was maybe why she hadn't left right away like Sharon planned," replied the deputy.

As he went into the hotel he was puzzled, but soon decided that possibly he had discovered something he should call to the sheriff's attention. He stopped, gravely consulted a big silver watch.

" It's gettin' about time for him to come back here, if he gets a fresh horse at Cottonwood."

CHAPTER XIII

MRS. OWENS met Sharon when she came downstairs after having personally shown the new guest to her room.

" Well, what do you think of her now ? " she demanded, but with none of the motherly concern she had shown at the station.

Sharon said without much enthusiasm that he thought Miss Kate Fielding a very presentable young woman.

Mrs. Owens laughed, and her eyes twinkled.

" If you want my honest opinion of her," she said, " she's the whole stack of blue chips, Mr. Sharon ! And I've got a pretty strong hunch she strikes you the same way !"

The man said he was the stablekeeper here, and it was his business to make sure Miss Fielding was delivered safely to her ranch.

" Oh, yes, sure ! But you're not impervious to the charms of a pretty girl, and one that has the earmarks of money all over her," she declared.

" Certainly not, Mrs. Owens, and I have never professed to be. But right now I have other things to think about besides the charms of the young lady."

She was angered almost to the point of explosion by this curt dismissal of the subject. She would have railed out at him had she known him a little better. Too, she was suddenly remembering that Sheriff Bob Gill had insisted that he meant to marry Kate Fielding.

" See you later, Mrs. Owens," said Sharon, and hurried to the street.

As she looked after him she decided he was angry and troubled about something. It was a correct guess, for the new stablekeeper was both. He stopped outside, stood in silent meditation, though several people spoke to him.

" Damn it !" he muttered finally. " This has shot things all to hell ! "

Excitement down town, and the hope of seeing Peltier somewhere, kept old Joe McComas close to the hotel, though

he had a home of his own. He had been watching for this chance, and now before Mrs. Owens could leave the lobby he shuffled towards her, grinning doubtfully.

"Ain't she sure a looker?" he asked. "Say, Henny, you heard anything about Sid Peltier?"

She gave him a scornful look which was in part a mask for her own anger and perplexity.

"Say," she demanded, "what'd Sharon buy you out for, Joe?"

"Huh? Buy me out for? 'Cause he wanted hisself a livery stable, I reckon."

His reply did not satisfy her, for she was a keen enough judge of men to know that Sharon was not the type to be satisfied with operating a livery stable even in a wild frontier town. He was subtle and sinister perhaps, and she was the more troubled because she had not been able to discover his real motive in being here. She had hoped that by discovering why he was here she might be able to join forces with him, if he were bent on doing harm to Sheriff Gill.

"But ain't you heard nothin' 'bout Sid, ma'am?" McComas persisted.

"Piker!" she taunted, and laughed, but it was not a very mirthful laugh.

"What you mean by piker?" he snarled. "I was as willin' to bet five hundred as you was, Henny Owens!"

"Yes, but now you're belly-aching about losing it, and I ain't."

Until now he had not noticed that she had not complained of her loss. In fact she had done a good deal of complaining at first, he thought. Now he was suspicious.

"Say," he demanded, "are you and Peltier workin' some sort of skin-game together?" With this sudden thought he was certain he had found the secret of the bartender's disappearance. "You know where Sid is?"

"No, you old fool, of course I don't know where he is! Don't you know he had a lot more of my money than he had of yours?" She would have said more, but held back her rage. Her eyes, however, told the old man all she wanted to say.

"Now, now, don't get me wrong!" McComas stammered. "I was just thinkin' as how Sid's goin' away might be some kind of a joke."

"Well, it ain't any joke!" she snapped, and turned and hurried towards the stairs. The old man shuffled out to the street.

Mrs. Owens stopped when she was half-way upstairs, for it had come to her with redoubled force that above everything else she must keep Bob Gill from marrying the rich and pretty new owner of the Bar B Bar Ranch.

Why had Gill described Kate Fielding as he had? His

description had been almost as accurate as if he had seen her only last week. One moment she was certain he had seen her recently, but the next she remembered that the sheriff had more than once made accurate guesses. There had been hundreds of guesses concerning Miss Fielding's looks, and not one of them except old Joe McComas's had approached that of the sheriff. Wasn't it possible that they had hazarded guesses that had proved to be correct ?

"Well, I'll just go up and tell her what Bob Gill said !" Mrs. Owens promised herself. "At least that'll show her his hole-card."

In the upper hallway she fought to gain composure like the composure of the girl who occupied the best room in the house. She rapped upon the door.

"Come in, please."

Though she could not have told why, the gentle words were to Henrietta Owens like so many slaps in the face.

"Darn her, I know she's better and richer than I am, and she knows it too, that's the trouble !" Mrs. Owens hissed to herself. She was smiling, however, as she entered the room and held the door. "I came up to see if there is anything we can do for you, Miss Fielding."

As she looked at the girl now, Mrs. Owens wondered how many men had been in love with her, and mused that any man would be a fool not to fall in love with her if he had half a chance.

"Thank you, I am very comfortable," said Kate Fielding. "I shall be ready to go down to dinner in a very few minutes, Mrs. Owens."

Though this dismissal was not as abrupt as had been Sharon's below, it was as obvious. To Henny Owens it was like a keen blade inserted and twisted without the aid of an anæsthetic.

"If there is anything you want, all you have to do is to let us know," she stammered, though she was not usually easily flustered.

"Thank you, I shall," smiled the girl.

At the head of the stairs Mrs. Owens stopped, clenched her hands. She wished she were out in the woods where she could express her real feelings.

"Well, if she doesn't want me to be kind to her," she sniffed, "she can just take care of herself for all I care ! She'll only be here for to-night anyway, so why should I make a fuss over her ?"

Having regained enough composure, she went down. In the lobby she laughed and talked with several men, told Owens to get his supper.

"I'll run the business, Cal."

She had failed to make a single discovery of consequence. Well, behind the counter would be as good a place as any

from which to keep watch. Hank O'Day came in, a six-shooter at his hip. She beckoned to the deputy and asked him whether Sheriff Gill had returned.

" Not yet. Want to see him when he comes back ? "

She shrugged, managed a smile.

" Oh, I haven't any reason for wanting to see him. I was just wondering whether he could make that long ride to Cottonwood and back in one day."

O'Day shrugged now.

" Tell you better if the sheriff gets back to-night, Henny. He'll have to cover a good eighty miles."

With a score of questions in mind, she did not know which to ask first. She did not want anybody to suspect that she had not been shrewd or that she had been lacking in subtlety.

" Hank," she began, " what do you know about her ? "

" Who ? Do you mean Miss Fieldin' ? "

" Yes, of course. What do you know about her, Hank ? "

" Well, she sure ain't hard on the eyes," grinned the chief-deputy.

" Oh, any fool could see that ! Of course she's pretty, and she knows it. What I want to know is whether you have ever seen her before."

O'Day took a sheaf of reward dodgers from a vest pocket and examined them one after another with droll seriousness. After a gasp of astonishment Mrs. Owens leaned across the counter.

" There ain't one here as tallies with her description," O'Day muttered.

" But do you suspicion she is a crook ? " Mrs. Owens whispered, more interested and puzzled than she had been before. " Hank, tell me ! Have you got some tip who she is ? "

The deputy gave her an unperturbed look with his Irish blue eyes.

" Ma'am," he said solemnly, " there is some things which a peace officer don't confide to anybody, even to his best friend."

Mrs. Owens felt elated now. She was beginning to get to the heart of this thing that had so worried and perplexed her. The deputy's words were to her proof enough that Sharon was not in this conspiracy alone.

" But you can tell me, Hank," she wheedled. " You can tell me anything. You know yourself there isn't a woman in town who can keep a secret like I can."

Far from subtle, O'Day saw only that she was animated by feminine curiosity. He knew from experience that there was not a woman in Ponderosa possessed of more curiosity than she, though he knew she was good at keeping secrets.

" Sorry, Henny, old girl," he said. " But as I told you before, there are just certain things a peace officer don't tell to anybody."

She saw now that wheedling and promises would avail nothing, and said :

" That's all right, Hank. Of course I know you can't tell everything."

As she watched him swagger into the bar, she began to put pieces together to make a readable pattern.

There was urbane, apparently crafty, Jim Sharon, who had come to Ponderosa with plenty of money and bought a livery stable that nobody except some old fossil like Joe McComas would have really wanted. Then there was Buck Blethroad, acknowledged to be as crooked as the hind leg of a dog, selling out to a rich Eastern woman. It was all beginning to be plain now. Perhaps Kate Fielding was the queen of some gang of Eastern crooks that had decided to move westward. Cattle stealing would be continued along with general outlawry, with the Bar B Bar as headquarters, while Sharon acted as intermediary and agent in town. Yes, and there was Shane, too. He was a stranger here. He must be mixed up in the plot somewhere.

CHAPTER XIV

Mrs. Owens' turbulent and explosive nature made it easy for her to grasp this probability and enlarge upon it. Now she thought she understood why Sharon had come from one direction and Kate Fielding from another. She remembered certain glances at the station, glances to which she had attached no importance at the time. Now she could interpret them.

Kate Fielding and James Sharon were criminals, that was it, fellow-criminals. They had met here as strangers by prearrangement. The old Bar B Bar Ranch was to be headquarters for their nefarious operations.

" Rich lady from the East !" Mrs. Owens sneered. " She's some con-man's wife, that's what she is, if she's anybody's wife !"

When Miss Fielding came downstairs a few minutes later, wearing a simple but obviously expensive black dress, however, Mrs. Owens was the personification of subdued attention.

" If you are ready to go in to dinner," she said, " I'll show you the way. But please do not expect too much out here, my dear."

" I shall be quite satisfied with what you have," said Miss Fielding, and her faint smile would have indicated to some observers how she appreciated being called my dear by the lady who ran the hotel.

They entered the dining-room, which was almost packed

to capacity. As she made her way among the tables the newcomer was as much at ease as if she had been accustomed to the society of miners, lumberjacks, cowboys and ranchers all her life. Many of the men who looked at her were somewhat awed, but their admiration was plain in their eyes.

"By Gawd, ain't she a swell?" whispered one man.

"I'd say she's sure mighty human," corrected the cattleman from Cienaga Grande. "If she's got plenty dinero I don't see why she oughtn't to wear fine clothes as fit her better'n a sack would. She sure don't look like havin' money had gone to her head none."

"But what the hell business has she got runnin' a cow ranch? She don't nohow look like she ever run a cow ranch."

"That, I reckon, is her business," said the oldtimer. "But you can go over and ask her, Bub, if you want to."

At the table where she had been obsequiously seated, Kate Fielding looked up and smiled. In her eyes was what might have been a twinkle.

"This is really a very lively town, Mrs. Owens. Tell me, is it like this every day?"

Henrietta could not confess that this was the day of all days in Ponderosa. She explained that the town was lively because it had been pay-day at the sawmills, and that the ranchers and cowboys had ridden into town because many of them had been paid too.

"But you like excitement, don't you, Miss Fielding?" the woman asked.

Miss Fielding did not smile now. Nor did her eyes twinkle.

"I really don't know whether I do or not," she said. "I shall decide that later, after I have had a chance to see what kind of excitement there is here. Thank you, Mrs. Owens, I will get along very nicely now."

Dismissed curtly yet graciously again, Henrietta Owens turned quickly to hide her expression.

"The durned high-toned hussy!" she hissed as she strode away. "She's sure a-puttin' on a lot of airs for a dressed-up female crook!"

Before she reached her look-out station behind the lobby counter, Mrs. Owens had an exultant thought that was pleasant because of its very savagery. Let Bob Gill marry this girl if he wanted to! Yes, let him do it, it would serve him right to find out, after he had married her, that she was a crook! She, Henrietta Owens, would do all she could to further such a match.

At about the time Kate Fielding ordered her supper from the shy but admiring waitress, Sheriff Bob Gill rode into the southerly edge of the village. He was weary enough to drop from the saddle and be asleep before he hit the ground,

but he knew that his willpower could make him stay awake for hours and be alert if this proved necessary.

Dismounting at a little Mexican restaurant, the sheriff turned his horse over to a Mexican youth.

" Take him and put him in my barn, Pancho. Here are dos reales for you, amigo."

Gill ate heartily of strong, piquant food, and drank three cups of strong coffee.

" Dios, Señor Sheriff," said Pasquale, the owner of the little restaurant. " If you have just ride in perhaps you do not know that there is the much excitement in el pueblo."

The sheriff nodded. He allowed Pasquale to talk in his excited way about what had gone on in town that afternoon, then asked :

" Have there been many fights ? "

The Mexican frowned.

" There have not been the fights that were muy mal," he said. " That is I have not hear of any that were—what you say—the serious, no ? "

" Well, I hope not," smiled the sheriff wearily as he pushed back his chair.

Sheriff Gill reached his office without having to travel through the main part of town, and was pleased when he saw that the little building was dark. This meant that Hank O'Day was up town.

After lighting the lamp the sheriff drew the shades at the windows. He lit a cigar, sat down and tilted back in his chair, rested his dusty boots upon the desk. The meal had rested him somewhat, but he was still tired, and was grateful for this opportunity to relax, at least for a little while.

" Now I wonder what's to do next ? " he mused. " Or rather what's to happen to me next ? "

He had dozed a little, drowsily meditated a little, when the blocky deputy came in.

" Why, hallo, Sheriff ! I didn't know you'd got back yet. You made good time."

" I've only been here a few minutes, Hank," drawled Gill. " Did she come ? "

" Did she come ? " yipped O'Day. " Did she come ? I'd tell a man she come ! "

When the sheriff only grinned, Hank enlarged upon his subject, the one subject of importance in Ponderosa that day and night—Kate Fielding.

" Dog-gone it, Bob, she's just about the purtiest thing I ever saw in my life ! Yeah, and she's class from the heels up, too ! You sure oughta use your eyes on her ! "

" Merely pretty, eh ? " Gill asked.

O'Day looked surprised.

" Well, she's got class, like I told you, and you can see

in just one look that she's got breedin', too, and what's called refinement. You know what I mean, Sheriff, you bein' that away yourself, even if you don't talk about it."

"Thanks, Hank," grinned the sheriff. "So she has breeding and refinement, eh ? Nothing more ?"

Hank puckered his big features in an effort to get a better picture of Miss Fielding from his memory.

"Well, she does sort of look like she's got a will of her own, Bob."

"Yes, I was certain she was a headstrong woman," declared the Sheriff.

"You was ? Say, how come you seemed to know so much about her, Bob ?"

Gill explained that in his opinion none but a very headstrong girl would have bought a cattle ranch in this wild country, especially without seeing it.

"By gosh, that's right, ain't it ?" Hank agreed. "I thought at first you sure knowed her, Bob. Yeah, she looks headstrong all right, but she don't look a bit spoiled."

Presently Hank forgot the girl who had set Ponderosa figuratively on its ears as he recalled that he had impatiently waited to tell the sheriff about Shane's strange departure from the town soon after the train had come.

"Went out to get some horses from a pasture, eh ?" said Gill.

"Hell, Bob ! You know there ain't no pastures out there in that direction, 'less he done rode clean to old Blethroad's place, and he sure wouldn't do that. All the pastures are the other way."

Bob Gill nodded agreement, while he tried to associate Shane's departure with that of two strangers who had departed from town along that same route that morning before daylight.

"Had supper, Hank ?"

O'Day said that he had not. He had been too busy keeping things in order up town.

"Then go and get it," Gill ordered. "The town will get along all right for a while. Marshal Evans will look after things, and I'll be here if I'm needed. I want to sit here and think and rest for a couple of hours if I can. Don't bother me unless there's big trouble."

Hank went towards the closed door, turned.

"You expectin' big trouble, Sheriff ?"

The sheriff shrugged.

"Not particularly, Hank. But send for me if there happens to be serious trouble."

Hank swaggered away to get a full meal and a large scolding from his good-natured wife.

"And won't she sure take my hide off for bein' a couple hours late ?" he chuckled to himself. "I'll be the one

that has the serious trouble. Huh! I wonder what Bob he meant by serious trouble, anyway? The boys are only happy to-night."

When she had finished her dinner Kate Fielding walked slowly from the hotel dining-room, apparently conscious of the throng that packed the lobby yet only casually aware of it.

She went to the counter, smiled and told Mrs. Owens that the meal had been very good, but when Mrs. Owens wanted to talk in order that she could try to gain a little more information about her guest, she discovered she had nobody to talk to.

"Huh!" She sniffed to herself. "If she cuts me again——"

Kate Fielding certainly showed no signs of wanting to cut anybody, however. When the old cattleman from Cienaga Grande smiled, and fatherly admiration made his eyes glow, she smiled in return.

"It's a very pleasant evening, isn't it?" she asked.

"It sure is, ma'am, but we have a lot of 'em this away out here. True, there's a sort of crimp in the air. That's caused by the snow back in the hills."

"Hills?" she laughed with a lift of eyebrows. The old cattleman liked her laugh, and the many other men who looked and listened intently liked her laugh as they liked her looks and her manner.

"Well, mountaings," the old rancher corrected. "But out here we mostly call 'em hills. Some of 'em are taller'n others, of course. Is it true, ma'am, as how you are goin' into the business of raisin' cows?"

"I am going to try," she confessed doubtfully, then was smiling. "But do they all have to be cows, sir?"

The old cattleman's ready laugh and hers made every man there wish she were his wife or sweetheart or daughter, no matter what his state of intoxication.

"Wal," the man from Cienaga Grande told her soberly, "it nacherly takes certain members to make a fambly. When the other members gets too numerous we calls 'em steers and sells 'em for beef, ma'am."

"I see," said Kate Fielding soberly, though many who watched suspected that she wanted to laugh. "Thank you."

Presently she touched the old man's arm deferentially and asked:

"Would you mind coming where there is not so much noise? I would like very much to ask you some questions about the country, if you don't mind."

"I sure don't, not a bit!" he assured her, more than a little proud because she had singled him out.

In a comparatively quiet corner he told her that he knew the location of the ranch she had bought, but little about the roads and trails there.

"You see, ma'am, my spread is forty miles in the other direction. I'd sure admire to have you pay me a visit down at Cienaga Grande any day you like."

"I shall do it," she promised, "though just now I cannot fix a date."

"Well!" Mrs. Owens told herself as she stood behind the counter, missing no details of what went on, though she could not hear what was being said in the corner. "She sure has a way with the men. I wonder if she thinks she can work old Cameron for anything? If she does——"

Twenty feet away, Kate Fielding was frowning in slight perplexity.

"But who can tell me about my ranch and the country about it, sir?" she asked. "I would really like to know all I can about it before I leave here to-morrow morning."

Now the old cattleman frowned. He saw a score of men who would have been able to tell her what she wanted to know, but not one of them was entirely sober, and he did not want to recommend any of them.

"Wal, if I was you, ma'am," he said slowly, "and wanted to find out about things from a good reliable source I'd amble right down the street and have a talk with the sheriff. If you'll just step outside I'll be glad to point out his office to you. These fellers in here, they ain't in no condition to tell anything straight to anybody, if you know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I do," laughed Kate Fielding. "And thank you very much for your trouble."

Mrs. Owens was too far away to learn why the two went outside. She did not have time to start conjecturing before the girl was back, however, with men scrambling to make a path for her as she hurried towards the stairway.

She was down within five minutes, wearing a long fur coat and a small grey turban to match. She hurried towards the street as if where she was going was nobody's business but her own.

"Gee whizz!" a man chuckled. "It sure musta took a powerful lot of squirrels to make that there coat."

"Squirrels nothin'! That there's a polecat coat!"

"Yeah! Then where's the stripes on it, Dave?"

"It's been dyed," declared Dave. "Them fellers that makes fur coats is foxy as trade-rats, from what I hear. They can take a skunk and make it right over into a silver-fox."

"Skunk?" muttered Dave.

"Skunk?" muttered Pete, who stood beside him.

They sniffed, then grinned with pleasure.

"Nope, that there wasn't no skunk coat!" declared

Pete. "That there smell she leaves behind her is more like carnations."

"It's plumb delikerate and reefined," added Dave. "Yes, siree! That's what I call perfoome as is wore by a real and genuwine lady. There ain't too much of it, just a leetle. Most females, to my way of thinkin', they overdoo this perfoome business."

CHAPTER XV

Sheriff Bob Gill, half-dozing, still sat with boots on desk when he heard the door open and close. Though he knew the footsteps were not those of a man, he did not open his eyes until his nostrils caught a faint, sweet perfume, wafted to him on the breeze that came through a partially opened window beyond the girl in grey furs.

"Good-evening, Kate," he drawled, and smiled lazily.

She stood there, very pale now, her eyes very wide. She had pressed back against the door.

"Bob Gill—in the name of God!" She whispered. "I didn't know! Are you the——"

He rose with the catlike agility some men had seen him display, but no man had ever seen his face twitch as it twitched now with emotions he could not control.

"Yes, I'm the sheriff here, Kate," he said.

As he strode towards her she seemed to be trying to press back through the closed door, yet at the same time it was impossible for her to keep from reaching her suddenly icy hands towards him.

Henrietta Owens would have had new and interesting food for thought had she seen that first excited, incredulous embrace, after which Kate Fielding raised her face to have her lips kissed. She freed herself quickly.

"Oh!" she gasped. "This is such a surprise, Bob! An old man told me to come and talk with the sheriff, but I had no idea it was you? Tell me, are you really sheriff?"

Gill motioned towards a chair.

"Sit down, Kate," he said, and his voice was husky. "I'll stoke this fire a little."

She sat down, looked at him, smiling doubtfully. He came and stood before her.

"You haven't changed much," she said, laughing a little. "Still, there's a big change, too."

"You are just the same Katie," he told her, and did not smile. "And just as beautiful!"

"Thank you, Bob." She could not hide her flush of pleasure. "But you haven't told me whether you are really sheriff of this wild town."

" Not only of the town but of the whole country roundabout," he explained.

" I should have known that much," she said. " But how long have you been sheriff, Bob ? "

He said he had filled that office for only a short time, explaining that he had succeeded Patterson, who had been killed.

" The sheriff was killed ? " she gasped. " Where ? "

" Patterson was killed on the ranch you have bought, Kate," Bob Gill said reluctantly.

" On my ranch, Bob ?' Why ? Oh, why was he killed there ? " Though she was still beautiful, now she had lost some of the perfect poise the town had seen her display.

Gill told her the former sheriff had been murdered by cattle rustlers.

" He was trying to break up a gang."

She sat silent for a few moments, and was paler. Then she tried to laugh.

" But of course there's no such lawless thing out there now, Bob ? " Her question was half declaration.

He smiled, shrugged.

" But is there ? " she demanded quickly. " Bob, you must tell me if there is."

" You haven't changed," he drawled.

" Do you mean because I still want my own way ? "

The sheriff nodded, and a sad light came to his eyes.

" Bob, is there still lawlessness out there where I have bought that ranch ? You have to tell me ! "

He thought of Sharon, thought of Shane and his sudden departure from town soon after she had come, thought of the two strange riders he had seen before daylight, thought of other things, too. The girl's eyes were suddenly demanding, and little bright spots burned on her velvety cheeks.

" Bob Gill, if you're the sheriff here, why weren't you at the train to meet me ? You certainly knew I was coming. Everybody in this town knew it. I've heard enough already to discover that the whole town has been betting on what I would look like."

He nodded, grinned, told her her coming had created much interest and excitement. She frowned a little, and again her eyes were demanding as she asked :

" Did you bet, Bob ? "

" I reckon not, Kate. I doubt that I would like to play a sure-thing game."

" I should have known that, Bob," she smiled, and pleasure came to her eyes. " Forgive me."

" Kate," he demanded, " why did you buy this ranch ? "

She reminded him that he had not told her whether there was lawlessness in the region where her ranch was located.

" There was when Buck Blethroad sold it to you, Kate."

" Buck Blethroad ! " She laughed. " Oh, I wish I could have seen him. Tell me, what does he look like ? "

He drolly described the former owner of the Bar B Bar, adding without apparent malice :

" He's the meanest old cattle thief that ever owned a ranch, Kate."

" Really ? "

He nodded, and would have dropped the subject for the time had she not asked :

" And the men he left at the ranch, Bob ? It was in the agreement of purchase that he leave his cowboys for me. What are they like ? "

He hesitated, speculating on the advisability of telling her the entire truth.

" Why don't you answer me, Bob ? Whatever you say it is not going to frighten me."

" Did you every hear of me trying to frighten anybody, Kate ? " he drawled with a sudden chill in voice and eyes.

" N-no."

" You didn't say that the way I want you to say it."

" No, I never heard of you trying to frighten anybody, Bob. Are you trying to frighten me now ? If you are——"

He sat down, rolled a cigarette, extended it towards her.

" Smoke ? "

" No, thanks."

She watched him, aware of the storms his cool face could hide, as she was aware of her own turbulence and unrest.

" Kate," he said, " you and I used to be in love, didn't we ? "

She laughed a little shakily.

" Perhaps we thought we were, Bob."

" That can't be more than half right."

" Half right ? What do you mean ? "

" That I still love you, Kate. It's never been any halfway business with me."

She sprang to her feet, pale now.

" No, no ! Don't start that again, please ! It's all over, Bob ! "

He smiled at her, and there was a cool, yet audacious twinkle in his eyes. She remembered that look of his, and remembered that it had been one of the reasons why she had finally refused him.

" Is it all over, Kate ?" he asked.

" Yes, Bob, it's all over. It was hopeless from the beginning. I can see that now."

The smile he gave her now was different.

" I still hope, Kate."

" No, no, Bob ! Please don't. We mustn't begin that all over again !"

" In that case," he advised with businesslike tone and

look, " sit down. You came for information. As sheriff I shall do my best to give it to you, so long as it does not interfere with my official duties."

She sat down stiffly, but he saw that she trembled. She looked at him, a little doubtfully, he thought, then he was sure of the bewilderment in her hazel eyes.

" Your official duties ? Will telling me everything about the ranch I have bought and its location interfere with any of your official duties ?"

" It could."

" I don't see how or why !" she declared hotly.

He told her a full explanation might possibly keep him from getting the man or men who had murdered the former sheriff, and he meant to do that.

" Then you don't trust me, is that it, Bob ?"

He replied calmly that there was nobody he trusted more, and added that her inexperience here could lead her to reveal something perhaps that he wanted kept secret.

" Inexperience ! I've had as much experience as you've had, Bob Gill !"

" Not out here, Kate. Perhaps in other ways you have had more."

" I don't know what you mean !" she flared, and again the bright spots were on her cheeks.

" I'm not asking you what your experiences have been since I last saw you, Kate. Let's see—that was about four years ago. But I am not going to tell you all about the region where you have bought yourself a ranch, not now."

Though through many troubled days and sleepless nights she had searched for his faults and shortcomings, she had never been able to accuse him of lack of candour, or lack of honest courage. She knew now he would tell her only what he thought it best to tell.

" As to the riders Blethroad left at your ranch," he said, " they are as hard a lot of scoundrels as ever polished saddle leather."

She looked a little puzzled.

" Do you mean they will rob me if they get the chance ?"

He nodded, and did not grin.

" Kate, why did you buy that ranch ?"

" Why did I buy it ? I had the right to, didn't I ? You used to—I just decided I wanted a cattle ranch, and had this chance."

When he only regarded her soberly, saying nothing, colour crept to her face until there was on it a flush of anger and suspicion. She cried :

" Look here, Bob Gill ! Do you think I bought that ranch just to follow you here ? If you do——"

He lifted a hand, a slow gesture of impatience that she recognized instantly.

" Please, Kate, let's not be childish any longer. We are grown-up now."

" Yes," she said softly, and for a moment her shoulders drooped, " we are grown-up, Bob."

" As for my suspecting that you followed me here," he went on, " only my father and mother know where I am, and I am certain they did not tell you, though possibly they have met you often, Kate."

" No, they did not tell me, even though I have seen them almost every day when I was at home."

" Are they well ?"

' Both very well, Bob," she answered, and wondered why she spoke so stiffly.

Usually drawling of speech, almost to the point of laziness, Bob Gill could speak very suddenly. Now his words were so abrupt that Kate Fielding started.

" Kate, let's be honest with each other ! Now that you are here, don't you think we should be married ?"

" Married ?"

" Married, Kate. It will be the simplest and safest way."

She checked a sob, but laughed the next moment, and there was a twinkle in her eyes.

" You should know me well enough to know I seldom look for the simplest and safest things."

" Yes," he nodded, and smiled reminiscently. " And you're still ready to take the bit in your teeth on the slightest provocation, eh ?"

" I do as I please," she retorted. " But you can tell me more about my ranch than you have told me. I came particularly to find out about the roads and trails."

Calmly, as if she were a stranger seeking information, he described the region through which the rough forty-mile road led. He drew her a pencil map, and as he worked she leaned close and touched his hand. She jerked her hand away when it seemed he had not so much as noticed the touch of her fingers.

" Here is where you'll cross the Chiquita," he explained, indicating, with the point of the pencil, what could have been a bridge. " From here to the Chiquita the country is rough. After you cross the stream you won't find the going so rough or the land quite so rugged. The road is a little straighter, too."

Their heads were close together when the door opened abruptly. Kate Fielding turned, flushed, and was conscious of having lost her usual poise.

" Oh !" she gasped.

" Hallo, Hank," drawled the sheriff, who seemed not at all perturbed. " Come on in. Kate, I want you to have the privilege of meeting Hank O'Day. Hank is under-sheriff, and of course chief-deputy."

Hank managed to erase the amazement that had come to his broad tanned face, though he reddened.

" How do you do, Mr. O'Day," she said. " I have seen you several times before, haven't I ?"

" Sure have ! Sure have !" Hank blurted, and wondered whether he should shake hands, or offer to. " I had to tend to the sheriff's business all day while he was away."

Kate looked at Gill, then back at the stocky deputy.

" Then he was away on official business ?" she demanded, not entirely able to conceal the thought that she had doubted the sheriff.

Hank explained awkwardly.

" Yep," he concluded, " Sheriff Bob, he was down at Cottonwood as chief witness in a horse-stealin' trial. The durned horse rustler was held to answer to the district court. He orter been hung without a trial."

Kate soon began to suspect that O'Day had come for something he was reluctant to talk about while she was here. She rose.

" I'll be going now, Bob. And thank you ever so much. This has been a pleasure indeed."

" Bob ?" Hank blurted. " Huh ! What the——"

Kate Fielding laughed.

" Bob Gill and I have known each other for years, Mr. O'Day. In fact we were children together back in——"

" Well, I'll be dog-goned !" Hank muttered. " So that's why you knowed so durned well what she looked like, Sheriff Bob ?"

Gill's face wore a sober look that would have puzzled almost anybody.

" Hank," he drawled, " was there something you wanted to talk to me about ?"

" Why, yeah, there is, Sheriff. If you'll excuse us, Miss Fieldin'——"

" Pardon us for a few minutes, Kate," added Gill, and followed the deputy outside.

When the door was closed behind them Kate Fielding sat twisting her lacy handkerchief with nervous fingers. There was a dull ache and a tremendous beating in her heart.

" Sheriff Bob !" she whispered. " And to think he's here, and sheriff in this wild country !"

When he returned after a few minutes and closed the door, she searched his inscrutable face as she had tried to search it many times before. She sprang to her feet.

" What was it ?" she cried. " What did he tell you that I could not hear ?"

He replied that O'Day was a wary officer, and merely wanted to report on routine matters. She grasped the lapels of his coat, looked into his eyes.

" Bob, that's not the truth. It's not true, and you never

lied to me. I know that look on your face. It's the same look as was there the day Douglas Fairchild sent word he was going to thrash you within an inch of your life! What did Mr. O'Day call you outside for?"

He managed a smile, shrugged a little.

"What was it, Bob Gill? You know, no matter what else has happened, I never lied to you, and you never lied to me."

"And I wish I didn't have to lie to you now, Kate."

She looked intently into his quiet blue eyes.

"You're not going to lie to me now? Bob," she said, and her voice was almost a whisper.

He smiled but did not lift a hand to touch her.

"No, Kate, I'm not going to lie to you now or any other time. But must you know? It concerns only me and my office. I promise you that."

"Yes, Bob, I must know. I shall not leave here till you tell me."

"Very well, Kate, if you must know. Hank has brought word that there's a fellow telling the town he's going to kill me."

She started, tightened her grasp on his lapels. Then she let go and sank into the chair behind her.

"There's—there's a man telling the town he's going to kill you? But Bob——"

Her eyes were filled with fright and horror, and a little of these left when he said there was nothing to worry about. Such things were not unusual in his present kind of life.

"Now, let's see what we were talking about when Hank came in," he said, and reached for the map he had been making.

"But—but aren't you going to do anything about it?" she faltered.

"Presently. We haven't finished our business here yet, Kate."

"Business," she repeated with a sob that was a half shaky laugh. "Oh, yes, Sheriff. We hadn't finished our business."

CHAPTER XVI

OUTWARDLY, the warning that he was to be killed had no more effect upon Bob Gill than if he had been called to supper or told that he might go to bed. He smiled wearily, and remembered the eighty-mile ride he had made between dawn and dark.

"You're terribly tired, aren't you?" Kate asked, and for the moment forgot fear and horror.

"I could do with a little rest."

"But why does this man want to kill you Bob?" she asked, and the fear and horror were with her again.

"I don't know, Kate."

"You don't know? Hasn't there been any tròuble between him and you?"

He did not answer her, because he was thinking of Bill Shane's strange departure and return. There was no horse pasture in the direction he had taken that could have been reached so quickly.

"What are you going to do, Bob?" she queried now. "You won't——"

"Well, naturally I shan't let him kill me if I can help it, Kate."

She studied him keenly. He had not changed, yet he had changed a great deal. Were the lines at the ends of his eyes and mouth weather-lines, or had they come because of pain and worry and danger? She remembered that he had never hunted trouble, but also what a terror he had been when trouble had looked for him.

"Keep out of his way, Bob!" she urged.

He smile wryly, and reminded her that there were certain things a sheriff had to do.

"Yes, I know, but that doesn't mean you have to go looking for that man, does it? Perhaps he is one of those professional gunmen I have heard so much about."

He made no answer to this. Instead he said:

"Kate, I wish you would stay in town for a few days at least, that is if you are determined to go out to this ranch you have bought."

Her eyes widened.

"If I am determined to go to my ranch!" she cried. "What do you suppose I bought it for, Bob Gill?"

As she had felt many times before in the years she had known him, she felt now that she wanted to throw her arms about his neck and at the same time wanted to slap him. He looked steadily at her.

"Didn't you buy this ranch to try to get away from yourself, Kate?"

"I wouldn't say that, Bob. Why should I want to get away from myself?"

His silence and half-smile was her answer.

"I'm happy," she went on. "I have all the money I need, as you know."

He nodded.

"Then why shouldn't I buy a ranch if I care to? One tires of cities and resorts, you know."

Again he nodded.

"I ought to know that, Kate. I couldn't live in a city again. It would be like jail to me now."

She wondered what had wrought this change in him. Not

many years ago he had been a city man. Could the change have come about because of her ?

" Bob, what brought you out to this wild country ?" she asked, still incredulous that she had found him here, and that he was the sheriff.

" Just why are you out here ?" he countered.

" Oh, I had to get away !" she cried impatiently. " I had to come somewhere to find something different. That's why. But what was your reason for coming ?"

" Well, let me see," he began, looking at her with sober eyes. " You refused to marry me, didn't you, Kate ?"

" Several times. Was that it ?"

" Suppose we say that I had to find something different, too ?"

Here he was, talking about their old love and hoping for a new, while up town there was a man bragging that he was going to kill the sheriff. She felt a cold shudder, for she had heard a good deal about the duties of Western Sheriffs.

" Bob, tell me, did you ever kill a man ?"

He replied that he had had varied experiences since he had seen her last.

" That wasn't what I asked you," she reminded. " Have you ever had to kill a man ?"

" Well, suppose we put it this way, Kate," said Bob Gill. " A fellow has some strange and interesting experiences in this new country. I have seen quite a stretch of it since I came back from home."

The cold shudder persisted. He repelled her when he talked this way, or did he ?

" You are evading me, Bob."

" Kate," he drawled, and a whimsical smile played about the ends of his mouth, " this job as peace officer is sometimes very interesting."

She made an impatient little sound, but after a moment was regarding him with doubt in her eyes, and a little concern.

" Is that all you have to say, Mr. Sheriff ?"

" On that subject, yes. But again I want to ask you to stay in town for a few days. Will you, Kate ?"

" I will if you can tell me a good reason why I should," she answered stubbornly.

Certain in his own mind that there was a conspiracy, and that she had been marked as its victim, he was as certain that if he told her this it would only serve to crystallize her determination.

He had only bits of evidence, and that circumstantial, with which to bear out his theory, a theory that was made mostly from the fruits of suspicion and intuition. Kate would demand something much more concrete. He saw she was frowning as if in perplexity.

"Bob, is it this?" she asked. "Do you want me to stay here for a few days in order that you may try to persuade me to marry you?"

"Not that, Kate. You seem to have decided that. I shan't mention it again."

She was surprised at his answer, and it gave her such a feeling of loneliness that she was actually homesick. She had found him here, where she had expected to see only strangers. And he would not again ask her to marry him.

"Then why do you want me to remain here, Bob?"

He said he wanted time to ride out to the Red Mesas country and return.

"To the Red Mesas country? Where is that? What has it to do with——"

"The Red Mesas country is where your ranch is, Kate. I would like to go out there to make sure that things are safe for you before you go."

Her chin was up now, and her eyes had changed. They were mocking and scornful, even defiant. On her lips was the old smile he had known to be there when she had been denied her own way.

"So that's it, is it?" she cried. "You think I need a guardian, do you?"

"That remark was unworthy of you, Kate," said Bob Gill coolly, yet she felt as if he had slapped her face.

"What else do you mean?" she demanded more imperiously. "You should know, if any one does, that I have taken care of myself for a long time."

He retorted that she had not lived in a wild country like this.

"Well, what difference does that make? Surely the men out here won't harm me."

When he only looked at her with that enigmatic expression in his eyes she cried out:

"Then are you afraid the wild animals out here will hurt me?"

"I guess not," he drawled. "There's sure no great danger from coyotes and bob-cats, and I can't recall anybody ever being attacked by a mountain-lion unless the lion was famished with hunger."

She was certain now that he was not telling half of what he knew, and because of this her determination to go to the ranch was redoubled.

"You'll have to tell me some good reason why I shouldn't go, Bob, if you really want me to stay here. Of course if there is any——"

"If you were a man," he said with his first show of impatience, "I'd put you in jail for a few days, Kate."

After a moment she laughed.

"So you could thus force me to marry you, Bob?"

"I shan't even ask you again to marry me, Kate. I told you that. But it's my duty to see, as far as possible, that decent folks in the territory are safe no matter where they are."

"Then you do believe I shall be in danger out there?" she said, and her face paled a little. "Bob, why don't you be honest with me about this? This is not like you used to be."

He would have told her he was honest with her, but he knew she would refuse to accept theory for fact.

"Oh, go ahead," he said. "Some day I'll ride out to see the cowgirl of the Bar B Bar."

"Well now, that's better!" she said, and smiled, though again his words had surprised her. "The cowgirl of the Bar B Bar will entertain you royally, Mr. Sheriff."

She rose now and extended a hand.

"This has been a pleasure, Bob. It was almost like old times. Good-night. Perhaps I shall not see you in the morning."

She seemed a little puzzled when he said he was going to the hotel with her.

"But I came alone, Bob."

"I have a little business up that way. Then I'm going home to bed."

Kate Fielding was innately gifted with a sense of moral balance, despite her stubbornness. He had asked her to do something and she had refused. She could not, therefore, ask him to do something for her. Nevertheless she was unable to keep the fear and worry from her face.

"Why, honey! What's the matter?" he asked tenderly as his hand went out.

She caught it, held it.

"Bob, that man! The one who says he is going to kill you! You will be careful? Please!"

"Kate," he said coolly, "I'm alive now because I've been careful. It's grown to be a habit with me."

"Then you'll—you'll kill that man, Bob?" she whispered, and drew away.

"I'll look him up, Kate."

He led her to the door, asked her to remain while he blew out the lamp. She heard him lock the door, felt his touch.

Though the wind that came down from the snowy mountains was biting cold, it was not that that made her shiver. She clung to his arm, though at the same time she believed she should have shoved him away. She was hazily aware that he was stroking her gloved hand.

As hazily she saw the crowd in front of the hotel. There was something about that pack of men that made her suspect all of them were waiting for the sheriff. She saw the pack part. She saw O'Day, the under-sheriff. She heard him when he shouldered close to the tall man beside her.

" Want me to back your play, Bob?" O'Day jerked a thumb towards the hotel saloon, from which came a lot of noise.

" Thanks, Hank. I reckon I'll play my own hand."

The crowd was thinner about the hotel entrance, as if it had scattered a little in deference to the lady. Kate Fielding fought for composure, thought she had enough of it. She smiled.

" Good-night, Bob. It has been a pleasure to find you here. And many thanks."

As if she had to run to get away from something, Kate sped across the lobby, which was almost deserted now. She managed to smile at Mrs. Owens, who still stood back of the counter.

" Good-night."

" Good-night, Miss Fielding. I hope you sleep well," returned Henrietta Owens, and watched Kate hurry up the stairs.

" Well, she's sure a fast worker," the woman told herself scornfully and without envy. " Her a-callin' the sheriff Bob already. Huh !"

In her room Kate fumbled for a match with shaking fingers. She managed to strike it, apply it to the wick of the lamp. She flung off the grey fur turban, hurried to the mirror.

" I'm as white as a sheet !" she whispered as she saw the colourless reflection. " For heaven's sake, what is the matter with me ?"

She stood tense and breathless, waiting. She uttered a tortured gasp as from below came the sound of a shot. It was followed by two others in swift succession.

After a paralyzed moment the girl from the East turned and flung herself upon the bed. She clawed frantically at the pillows as her tearless eyes tried to picture what had happened below, what was still happening.

" It's all over !" she whispered. " There aren't any more shots !"

She rolled to the side of the bed, but when she stood up she discovered her legs were weak.

" Oh !" she whispered. " Oh, I can't stay here like this !"

She managed to reach the door, fumbled for the knob.

CHAPTER XVII

Though she knew very well what had occurred, if not its outcome, Mrs. Owens demanded to be told.

"What happened in there, boys ? What happened ?"

In the saloon, Shane had been bragging that he would kill the sheriff when Bob Gill entered through the swinging front doors. At sight of the officer Shane uttered a curse, jerked out his heavy pistol and fired. Gill fired twice in quick succession. Shane's bullet missed, perhaps because of his haste, perhaps because of the several drinks he had taken. The sheriff's bullet did not miss.

In the crowd that milled into the lobby Jim Sharon appeared. He forced through to where Mrs. Owens stood behind the counter.

"What happened ?" he demanded. "I thought I heard shots."

"Shots ? You did hear shots, man ! They was in the saloon."

As Sharon hurried towards the saloon men told him there had been a killing in there. As the stable owner forced into the bar he saw men staring at a figure on the floor.

"I was afraid of something like this !" Sharon cried righteously. "I heard him boasting that he was going to get the sheriff, and I tried to persuade him to go to bed and forget it."

There were men who said they had heard the liveryman arguing with his hostler and trying to make him go to bed.

Hank O'Day was now beside his chief and ready for action in event of more trouble. There was none, nor was there threat of it.

"I'm mighty sorry about this, Sheriff," Sharon declared. "If I had thought it would come to this I'd have forced him to turn in a while ago."

The sheriff looked hard at Sharon.

"Where did you find Shane ?" he asked coolly.

"Find him ? Why, he showed up here and said he was good with horses. I was in need of a hostler, so I hired him."

"I see," Bob Gill drawled. "You hired him as head hostler, eh ?"

"Yes, yes," answered Sharon. "Do you suppose the fellow could have been a desperado, Sheriff ?"

"Well, he ain't one now !" grunted the old rancher from Cienaga Grande. "Mebbe he had the idee he was though."

"This is something I certainly can't understand," Sharon muttered. He scratched his head. "You had had no trouble with him before, Sheriff ?"

"I had had no trouble with him," Sheriff Gill replied, placing emphasis on the pronoun, but few of the gaping men in the saloon noticed.

The sheriff ordered O'Day to see that the body was taken to the coroner's office, then went to the bar back of which Cal Owens stood, considerably less red of face than was his wont.

"Cal, close the place," Gill ordered. "You've done enough business for to-day."

"Close up?" Owens gasped. "What you mean? It's early yet, Bob."

"Close the place for to-night," said Gill. "That's all there is to it. There's been enough noise and excitement round here. Remember you're running a hotel, too."

Though he knew well enough what Sheriff Gill's orders usually meant, Owens did not have the courage to accept this one, though not because he realized how much money would be lost by closing early.

"You speak to Henrietta about this, Sheriff," he stammered. "She'll sure raise hell if I shut up now without her orders."

"Wal," drawled the old cattleman, "so she wears the britches, does she?"

Several men were quick to answer that Mrs. Owens was boss of both hotel and saloon.

With a bent smile of derision and impatience on his face, Gill started towards the lobby. As he entered it Mrs. Owens cried out:

"What happened in there, Bob? Was he——"

"There was some trouble," he answered. "It wasn't of much consequence."

There were men in the lobby now who had seen the dead man on the floor, a few who had seen the actual shooting. Mrs. Owens knew that Sharon's head hostler had been killed, and by whom. But why? Why had Shane roared and boasted about town that he was going to kill the sheriff?

"How did it happen, Sheriff Bob?" she faltered. "What led up to it?"

A little more than half-way up the stairs stood a very pale girl, one hand clutching the banister, the other holding the fur coat which was on by only one sleeve. She, too, knew that a man had been killed, that the man had been the one who had threatened the sheriff, bragged that he was going to get him before another sun came up on Ponderosa.

With this knowledge she shuddered, shrank, while at the same time thankfulness swelled and tried to warm her heart.

"Not of much importance!" she whispered. "What does a human life mean out here anyway?"

She knew this was not the only thing that troubled and puzzled her, but the fact that the man who had taken the life was the boy she had grown up with and loved.

"I can never like him again," she whispered. "He will never be the same to me again!"

She forgot part of her anguish and perplexity when she saw Bob Gill, heard him speaking to Mrs. Owens. Why did he look so unconcerned? How could he? Didn't it even excite him to have killed another man?

"You what!" cried Mrs. Owens, as if she could not possibly believe what the sheriff had said to her.

"I just ordered Cal to close up for the night," Gill repeated. "There's been enough business done for one day, Henny. He sent me to you with the order."

"Well, I've got it!" she cried. "And I'm tellin' you I'm not goin' to close up! You suppose I'm goin' to lose all this business? This is the best night we've had since we opened up here four years ago!"

Now the white-faced girl on the stairs forgot all else as she watched and listened. Down there Bob Gill was talking as if he had not had to kill even a rattlesnake.

"Oh, isn't he afraid of anything?" she whispered. "That woman down there, she'd scare me to death the way she looks now!"

In fiery words punctuated with profanity Mrs. Owens was declaring that she would not close the saloon. What right had this pinhead of a sheriff to ask her to do such a thing? There wasn't any law that said she had to close it before daylight if she didn't want to, was there?

"No law!" the sheriff snapped. "But there's been enough excitement for one day, and you've done enough business in the bar. There are guests here in the hotel who want to rest in peace and quiet. There's a law of respect and decency. Close up!"

"I'll see you in hell first!" she cried. Her black eyes smouldered in her pallid face. "You just try to close me up, Bob Gill. If you hadn't gone in there and shot that bragging fool there wouldn't have been more than the usual racket, and you know it!"

On the stairs Kate Fielding found that she was blinking hard to keep back hot tears that were both joy and agony.

"He's thinking of me!" she whispered. "No, he's thinking of all of us who want to sleep."

She was almost breathless now, for she was watching a conflict of strong wills. Which would win?

"Close up!" ordered the sheriff again.

"Yeah?" Mrs. Owens sneered. "Well, you just go ahead and close me up."

"I think," drawled the sheriff, "that you had better close the place for the night, Henny."

"You think? You think, do you? Well, what you think don't go deuce high with me, so long as I run accordin' to the law of this town!"

Gill gave her a long, cool look, which she returned with a fiery one. Then he sauntered to the door leading to the bar, opened it.

"Clear out, men!" he ordered calmly yet crisply. "There'll be no more drinks here to-night."

The men in the saloon understood this order. They scrambled towards the swinging doors. Gill called out:

"Cal, have you got the keys to this place?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got 'em, Sheriff Bob!" Owens stammered. "Did she——"

"Then give them to me, Cal."

Wondering what miracle the sheriff had wrought, Owens helped the dealers of the monte, faro and roulette games gather their money. He placed it in the big safe for them.

When the professional gamblers had gone the sheriff locked front and rear doors, herded Owens towards the door leading to the lobby.

"Get on out, Cal."

As Owens went he was met by a fiery tirade from his flashing-eyed wife.

"You fool! You damned coward, what'd you let him bluff you for? Give me those keys! I'll open up and stay open!"

Sheriff Gill locked the doors, dropped the jangling keys into a pocket.

"You've got no right to do this, Bob Gill!" Mrs. Owens cried. "I'll sue you for damages for it! I'll sue you for five hundred dollars! We could have made almost that much by staying open all night!"

"Why don't you make it five thousand, Henny?" the sheriff drawled. "You'd have as much chance of collecting five thousand as five hundred."

"Yeah, from you!" she sneered. "Anybody'd stand a fine, fat chance of getting anything out of you, Bob Gill!"

Gill walked to the counter, and the white-faced girl on the stairs could see that he was paler under his tan. She was certain that he had not seen her and knew she could efface herself, but was powerless to move.

"Mrs. Owens," said the sheriff, "do I owe you anything?"

"Yes, you do!" the woman answered, raising her voice in her anger and excitement until it was almost a scream. "You owe me a lot! You owe me more than six hundred dollars! What about that, you double-faced crook! And you the sheriff, too!"

Kate Fielding could see that Bob was still paler, but she could detect no trace of anger about him.

"Do I?" he drawled, and not a person within earshot but recognized the ominousness of that drawl. "If you will explain and convince me, Mrs. Owens, I will be happy to settle any debt I owe you, a hundred cents on the dollar."

What Kate Fielding heard during the next minute or so convinced her of what she had already suspected. She had been the subject for reckless and vulgar betting. She reddened with humiliation and started to shrink back up the stairs.

"No!" she decided quickly. "I won't go. I'll wait and see what happens. This may prove what kind of a man he really is."

"Well," said the sheriff, "how much do I owe you, Mrs. Owens?"

"Owe me?" she shrilled. "You owe me and half the other people in this town! You and Sid Peltier were in cahoots on this skin-game! You got at least half the money he held as stakeholder. Say, don't you think I know that slick crook I had as bartender couldn't have got away if the officers hadn't been in cahoots with him?"

She paused for breath, stared, sneered:

"Well, what are you laughing at, Bob Gill? Is that the way it affects you because I got on to your crooked game? And you the sheriff, too!"

Men were staring now, some in open-mouthed surprise, others wondering whether they were sober enough to hear correctly. The girl on the stairs held her breath. Bob Gill was merely grinning as if he had something to apologize for.

"I'm glad you reminded me of that, Henny," he said now. "I had no idea you knew Peltier was a crook. I was wise to him myself, and when I figured he'd got about all the stakes he ought to have before jumping town I took it all away from him and——"

"Yeah, you took it all?" Mrs. Owens sneered, but now there was less fire in her eyes and less contempt on her twisted lips.

The sheriff turned quickly when a hand plucked at his sleeve.

"Why, howdy, Joe. I didn't know you were here. How's tricks?"

"Tricks be durned!" McComas snorted. "What's that aboot you takin' all that bet money from Peltier? Is she true?"

"It's true, Joe," said the sheriff wearily. "It's all in the bank across the treet. To-morrow I'll turn it all back to the ones who rightfully own it."

"You'll turn it all back to-morrer?" the old man muttered. "Then I ain't lost that five hundred I bet with Henny after all? Say, why didn't you let them bets stand, Bob? That there mind picture of mine was a dead-ringer for her!"

Back to the counter Mrs. Owens dropped weakly to the stool on which she often sat to rest her feet. Her elbows trembled as she rested them upon the broad board that made the counter.

"I wonder what this is all about?" she muttered. "I wonder if I've made a fool of myself somehow?"

"But why don't you let them there bets stand, Sheriff?" insisted McComas. "I'd won sure as hell!"

"And on a sure-thing game, Joe?" smiled the sheriff.

The old man screwed up his wrinkled features, grinned sheepishly.

"Why, yeah, I sorter reckon mebbe it would 'a' been a sure-thing game, now I come to think it clear," he confessed. "Yeah, Bob, you sure done the right thing takin' all that money away from Peltier. So we all get it aback to-morrer, eh?"

"Let me see, Joe," Sheriff Gill frowned. "It may be the day after to-morrow before I can settle with all of you. I'll be busy all day to-morrow on official business."

"I knew it! I knew it!" Mrs. Owens sneered. "That's why she called him Bob when she told him good-night a while ago! Skin game! That's what it was!"

She realized suddenly that Bob Gill had not made a single bet, though he could have won at least a thousand dollars. Bob had laid a hand on McComas' shoulder.

"Here is the real reason I took all that money, Joe," he said. "It wasn't that I suspected he was a crook and would vamoos with it. But there are certain things that should not rightfully be the subject of bets, Joe."

"Sech as——"

"Such as a fine and respectable young lady," supplied the sheriff. "When I'm around, such subjects just can't be used for wild and reckless betting like we've had round here for the past week or so."

"Oh!" the white-faced girl on the stairs gasped. She began to move cautiously backward up the steps, though determined to stay near enough to see what next occurred below. She stopped in the deeper shadow, eyes dilated, ears alert.

She saw Sheriff Bob Gill turn from the old man and hand the bunch of keys to the woman who sat slumped behind the counter.

"Here, Mrs. Owens," he said. "Take these and open up at the regular time to-morrow."

"All right, Sheriff Bob," she faltered, and tried to smile. "G-good-night."

"Sheriff Bob!" Kate Fielding repeated as she groped her way back up the stairs. Once in the dim hallway, she ran towards her room. She found the handle of the door turned it. A blast of smoky air met her as she pushed open the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

KATE FIELDING stifled a scream, and felt weak and silly. The smoke was merely from a smoking lamp. She lowered the wick, quickly raised the window. A blast of cold air rushed in upon her, yet as she stood there she mused that the lamp could have easily started a fire that would have caused much more disaster here. Down in the saloon a while ago the fire of hate or liquor had fired a man's brain, and now he was dead.

She looked for her coat and discovered she still had it on. She turned up its big soft collar, wished suddenly that Bob Gill was here to hold her in his arms. She wondered whether this wild town was a sample of what she would find at her ranch.

"I'm getting sentimental," she warned herself. "And I mustn't let myself get sentimental."

She started at the sound of footsteps. They stopped at her door. Heavy knuckles rapped.

"Come in," she said. No matter who was there, anybody's company would be better than being alone.

Hank O'Day entered, and hurriedly closed the door.

"Beg your pardon, miss," he said, "but the sheriff, he told me to come up and see if you wanted for anything."

"Oh—really not!" she stammered.

Hank crossed to the window, lowered it, grinned at her apologetically.

"I reckon you hadn't noticed it was up, ma'am. It's sure goin' to be a frio night."

"Frio?" she queried.

He told her that was Spanish for cold.

"Oh, yes," she laughed a little. "It is cold already, isn't it? Really, there is nothing I need, Mr. O'Day. I'm sure I shall be quite confortable."

"Well," he stammered, and fumbled his broad hat. "I'm sorry if I bothered you, miss. The sheriff just told me to say as how if there's anything you want you only got to let us know."

Though she shivered, gratitude warmed her heart. While death and threat of death had stalked and perhaps still stalked in the cold night, Bob Gill had not been too busy to think of her. She said:

"Will you please tell Bob—that is, Sheriff Gill—that I would really like to talk with him for a few minutes, Mr. O'Day?"

Hank looked at her. How pretty she was, yet how tired. She was scared, too.

"The sheriff's mighty tired," he said, loyal to his chief. "Reckon that's why he sent me, ma'am. He's had a long day and a hard ride."

"Yes, he did tell me he rode eighty miles to-day," she confessed. "Then tell him it's not important. Thank you for coming, Mr. O'Day, and thank him for sending you."

After Hank had gone she stood still. She was painfully conscious of the fact that unless she went downstairs she would have to wait until morning to have someone to talk to. If she could only talk to somebody for a few minutes it might erase the picture of what had happened downstairs from her mind, make her forget her fear that there might be more killing.

She told herself she should go to bed. Instead she sat down, shivering again. There was a folded blanket across the foot of the bed. She wrapped it about her shoulders.

She became angry with herself because she could not make her thoughts coherent. She wished again that Bob could have come. If he would only come and ask her, yes, order her not to go to her ranch to-morrow!

She held her breath as she heard distant footsteps. They came nearer, stopped at her door, but they were not the same as the ones that had stopped there a short while before. Somebody's hand gripped the knob, twisted it.

"Kate!"

"Oh, Bob!" she cried. "Come in! Yes, please come in!"

He came in, closed the door, smiled at her. He did look tired, she mused, and pity filled her heart. The next moment she was angry because he was so impassive. How could a man remain so unperturbed after he had just killed another man?

"I decided to come up anyway, Kate," he said. "Hank told me you looked a little scared."

"Did he say I wanted you to come?" she asked.

"No, he just said he thought you looked scared, and I thought I'd better come up for a few minutes."

"But why should I be frightened, Bob?"

He did not reply, but went to the corner of the room. For the first time she became fully aware that there was a small heater there, as he began to kindle a fire. She could not confess that she had failed to notice the little stove.

"I—I wasn't cold, Bob. I was just thinking I had better get to bed."

He adjusted the dampers after the fire was roaring up the pipe. He moved aside that the glowing heat could reach her. If he would only ask her now to marry him! Why didn't he ask her?

She saw from the look in his eyes that he would not ask her again, and it angered her. Yet she knew she must have something to make her forget trouble and death and worry.

She confessed that she had been on the stairs watching and listening to what had occurred below, but could not admit that the shots she had heard had taken her there as if she were powerless in the clutches some mighty force.

"Yes, I saw you there," Bob Gill said impersonally. "That was why I sent Hank up to see whether you needed anything. You looked frightened. I had some work to do and couldn't come myself just then."

That was like him, she mused, like him not to forget her, like him to send someone in his place when it was impossible for him to come.

She wanted to pat the bed beside her and tell him to come and sit down. No, she must not let herself do this. It would be a confession that she needed him. She forced a laugh, and said:

"I liked the way you tamed that woman downstairs, Bob. She's a termagant, isn't she, Bob?"

A twinkle came briefly to his eyes.

"Oh, Henny?" he drawled. "Yes, she has a fiery temper, but she's all right at heart, I reckon. For instance, if she thought you or anybody else was in need, she'd dig up her last dollar."

"That's more than some people would do!" she flared, then flushed, and bit cruelly at her lip. She did not see pain in his eyes, but knew it was behind them.

"Oh, Bob! I didn't mean that! Really I didn't! I know how many hundreds of people you have helped, and without telling anybody about it, either. That's why you haven't got as much money as I have now."

"We all say mean things sometimes," he drawled. "That's the trouble with Mrs. Owens, Kate. She's mad at me, but she doesn't really know why. That accounts for the display of temper you happened to witness downstairs a while ago. She meant all the time to take my order and close up, but there was the chance to—well, throw the hooks into me before a crowd."

"She's mad at you?" Kate Fielding cried, and the flash of her eyes was almost like the flash of Mrs. Owens'. "What right has she to be angry with you, Bob? What have you done to make her resentful?"

"Oh, some folks get that way without much reason, Kate," he answered. "It's all over now. Henrietta just had to sort of blow off steam and let her safety-valve get back to normal. She didn't mean all of it."

No, indeed, Bob Gill had not changed much, she mused once more. He should have slapped the face of that woman downstairs. But after all, hadn't he slapped it, slapped it in a way that was even more effective than a physical slap?

Kate made a discovery about this sheriff at Ponderosa, a discovery she should have made long before he had gained

that title. He took the trouble to read beyond the superficial traits of human nature. That was it. He was tolerant, too, tolerant enough to keep his composure under all conditions. She herself was not.

"You're very tired, aren't you, Bob ?" she said.

He only smiled at her in answer. That was like him, too. He had told her once that he had ridden eighty miles, and to him it would be apparent that there was no need to tell her the same thing again.

"Mind if I roll a smoke, Kate ?" he asked. "I shan't stay and bother you long. Just wanted to make sure you are comfortable before I turn in for a few hours' rest."

"For a few hours' rest ? Why, Bob, you should sleep for at least twelve hours, after a hard day like you have had to-day."

He replied that he would be busy to-morrow and would have to be out early.

"But doesn't a sheriff get any rest ?" she laughed. "I've read that the hardest jobs sheriffs have is sitting in their offices and swapping yarns."

"Oh, we do swap yarns at times," he said with a grin.

She watched him as he made and lit the cigarette without spilling a grain of tobacco on the faded rug. Wasn't a man shocked after he had killed another man ? Wasn't he shaken ? She herself still shivered from the reverberations of the shock she had received.

She wanted to flare into anger at the impersonal way in which he was treating her. Was she no more than any ordinary girl to him ? After all, he had asked her more than once to be his wife. He would have been solicitous of the comfort of any ordinary girl. Whether she willed it or not, Kate did not want him to treat her as he would have treated any other girl, and she was angry at herself for feeling as she did.

"Bob," she demanded suddenly, "why did you go into that saloon when you knew the man who had threatened to kill you was down there, when you knew he was waiting ?"

When he only smiled crookedly and she saw the pain in his eyes, she felt all her anger drain away, though she could not forget that he had killed a man.

"But why didn't you try to arrest him ?" she persisted. "You're the sheriff here, Bob. You could have arrested him, couldn't you ?"

"Occasionally, Kate, a sheriff runs across a man who just can't be arrested."

She frowned.

"I don't believe I know just what you mean by that, Bob," she said.

"It's just that he began shooting as soon as I came in sight, Kate."

" And you ? "

He looked at her as if she should have known the answer. She did, in fact.

" And you shot back ? "

He inclined his brown head, the hair on which was always unruly.

" Which way would you have had it, Kate ?" he asked casually. " It was a case of him or me. There was no chance to come out of it with both of us alive. You know that."

" Which way would I have had it ?" she cried. " Oh, you know that, Bob ! I'm glad you shot back ! "

" That's the way I looked at it, Kate. I didn't like to have to do it, but after all, I don't believe I'm quite ready to cash in, yet."

" Cash in ? "

" Well—die then."

" Die !" she repeated, and wondered what part of a second had flashed between him and death.

When he moved towards the door she cried out :

" Bob, tell me what to do with that cattle ranch I have bought ! You must tell me, for actually I don't know."

" Why, run it, Kate. In fact I've got a couple, and they keep me on the jump tending to them and my office too."

" You own a couple of ranches ? " she asked in some surprise. " you didn't tell me about them."

" Well, now, you didn't ask, did you ?" he countered, and the twinkle came to his eyes again. " They're down in the Verde country. Yes, they pay fairly well."

As he told her good-night she flung the blanket from about her shoulders, sprang to her feet. She clutched his wrists.

" Bob, you can't leave me like this !" she cried. " You act like we were perfect strangers. Can't you even offer to kiss me good-night ? Please !"

She lifted her face, but felt him stiffen. If he were fighting a desire to kiss her, the evidence of that fight was behind his calm eyes.

" I never put much stock in platonic kisses, Kate," he told her. " And I never put too much stock in kisses that are prompted by too much sentiment. Right now you're wrought up because of what's happened since you came. To-morrow you won't even want me to kiss you."

He removed the clutching fingers from his wrists, smiled as he said :

" Good-night, Kate. If there's anything you need I reckon you'll have to go to the head of the stairs and yell. We haven't any electric bells out here yet."

After he had closed the door she stood staring at it with bewildered eyes. A tear rolled unheeded down over each of her velvety cheeks.

Presently she picked up the blanket from where she had

dropped it. There was a simple, unfriendly little rocking-chair in the room. She sat down, draped the blanket about her shoulders. She spread her hands to the warmth of the little stove which was much quieter now, as if it, too, had breathed its hardest for the night.

"Don't put much stock in platonic kisses!" she whispered. "I wonder if he hasn't kissed a girl since he told me good-bye so long ago back home!"

The little stove, in its cooling, was making little apologetic noises, like some fiery tempered woman after a noisy outburst, when Kate Fielding rose at last and began to make ready for bed.

"He told me to go run my ranch!" she said with a return of anger as she regarded her reflection in the cheap mirror. "Well, I will run it, or know the reason why I can't!"

CHAPTER XIX

There was not a cloud in the sky that Wednesday morning. Though the air was crisp, the wind was coming up from the lower country and the snow was beginning to melt on the mountainside.

A few minutes before eight o'clock, Jim Sharon, handling four horses with dexterity and flourish, made a short turn and stopped the heavy spring-wagon in front of the hotel. Joe McComas, ever critical of how the business he had sold was being operated, remarked approvingly:

"You sure got that outfit lookin' smart, Master Sharon. I never seen them horses lookin' better, and that rig looks now like it had paint on it."

Sharon acknowledged the compliment with a reluctant smile, but said nothing.

"Takin' along a rifle-gun, eh?" said the old man. "I see you got a pistol, too."

Sharon touched the carbine that lay in the crack back of the seat cushion.

"Yeah, I see her," McComas agreed. "It's a good idee to take a Winchester along. That country out yonder where you're goin' is purty rough yet."

"It may be," Sharon said, "but I'll have to see it rough before I'll believe it."

Cal Owens appeared now, both hands full of baggage.

"She'll be down in a minute or so, Sharon."

Sharon climbed from the seat, handed the reins to the old liveryman.

"Hole 'em, McComas."

Sharon stowed the baggage while Owens lugged out another load. Owens now had to help with two steamer trunks.

"Huh!" chuckled McComas. "Durned if she ain't got enough baggage to pack four jackasses. I'll bet a dollar she's got a heap of finery in them trunks and things that she won't nohow need out at old Buck Blethroad's ranch. Tee-hee!"

Kate Fielding appeared promptly, clad in the fur coat and turban she had worn the night before. A crimson scarf hung from a shoulder, and she held fur gauntlets in her left hand. As if he had been waiting, Sheriff Gill stepped from the street doorway of the saloon, which had opened two hours before.

The sheriff wore jeans, a short sheepskin-lined coat below which the end of a holster showed. He smiled and lifted his Stetson.

"Good-morning, Kate. It's good to see you looking so well this morning."

She knew he was aware of the shadows under her eyes, though she had tried her best to erase them.

"Why, good-morning, Bob!" she cried. "I had not hoped to see you this morning."

Sharon was scowling now. His scowl deepened when Hank O'Day came from the saloon armed and clad much as was the sheriff.

"What the hell?" Sharon growled back of his moustache. "What are these officers doing here?" He smiled, however, as he turned to the girl.

"I think we are ready, Miss Fielding. I have brought along some warm robes."

Kate was extending a hand towards Sheriff Gill, and was about to tell him good-bye, when he said:

"We're going along, Kate, Hank and I. We can say good-bye later."

"Huh?" McComas gasped, and almost dropped the four lines he was holding. "What the hell? Say, I didn't know nothin' 'bout this here!"

"You're going with us?" Kate cried, unable to conceal her pleasure and happiness for a brief moment. "But I—I——"

"I didn't know anything about this, Sheriff," said Sharon. His face had chilled.

The eyes of sheriff and liveryman looked hard and steadily.

"I didn't know that it was necessary to tell you beforehand, Sharon," drawled Bob Gill.

After a few moments in which he managed to gain control of his anger, Sharon shrugged.

"Well, I suppose we can make room for you if you're bound to go."

"Plenty room," said Hank O'Day.

"We'll make room," said the sheriff. "We's not too particular about being comfortable."

The puzzled girl was remembering that he had come to her last night to make sure that she was comfortable.

" But why are you going, Bob ?" she cried. " You didn't say anything about it !"

Sheriff Gill calmly explained that he had some official business in the direction she was taking, and there seemed no reason why he and Hank O'Day should not accompany her, at least for part of the way.

" Is this arrangement agreeable to you, Miss Fielding ?" asked Sharon as he looked at the girl.

" Why of course it is," Kate answered. " I'll be very happy to have the sheriff and Mr. O'Day ride as far as they like with us, Mr. Sharon."

Sharon managed a shrug, but not a smile. He said a little surlily as he turned to the two officers :

" The matter rests with Miss Fielding, of course. If she has no objections——"

" Of course I have no objections," said Kate. " Why in the world should I ? Sheriff Gill and Mr. O'Day can tell me about the country and about the cattle business as we travel. There is certainly a lot I would like to learn about them."

" Bet your life Sheriff Bob can tell you !" old Joe McComas chipped in eagerly. " There ain't many fellers in this here country as knows more aboot cattle and horses. And Hank, he knows aboot 'em, too," he added as an afterthought. Then as he caught a flash of Sharon's eyes, he became silent, though he muttered to himself that he wondered what that feller looked so mean for when he had such a good load of passengers for the day.

It was the sheriff who assisted Kate to her part of the front seat, which in fact was the only seat. Sharon took the lines from the old man and stepped into the rig, while Gill and O'Day climbed in and found precarious seats atop the baggage.

" Stop at the stable, Sharon," ordered the sheriff.

" I'm not going that way," the liveryman growled. " Everything's all ready, so there ain't any reason why I should stop there."

" Stop at the stable." Gill drawled.

" Yeah ? Who says so ?"

" I say so," replied the sheriff, still unruffled.

On the front seat Kate Fielding chilled and thrilled as she recognized the implacable command in those few drawled, calm words. She turned with a question in her eyes, and saw Gill rolling a cigarette. He grinned at her in answer to the mute question.

" I think we are going to have a fine day, Kate. In fact I am sure of it."

" Oh, I really hope so !" she managed. " It—it was so cold last night."

When the rig was stopped in front of the stable the undersheriff hopped out. Sharon was passing the lines to Kate with the intention of following, when the sheriff said :

" Never mind, Mr. Sharon. Hank and one of your hostlers can bring out the other seat. I'm sure they won't need you to help them."

The new owner of the stables jerked about, his face drawn and livid for a moment.

" Say, who's running this business ?" he snarled. " There are some things I forgot."

" Tell O'Day what you want," the sheriff ordered. " He'll get them for you. I thought you said a while ago that everything was ready and you were all set to go."

" I was," Sharon admitted, with a smile the girl recognized as forced. " But when we stopped here I remembered something I had forgotten. Well, it don't matter after all. It wasn't important."

" Might as well tell Hank what it was," insisted the sheriff with sober politeness. " He'll sure be glad to get it for you. It won't be any trouble for him."

Already bewildered, Kate wondered why Sharon's face was drawn and livid again, why he seemed fighting to keep back a violent outburst of some kind.

O'Day appeared, lugging the rear seat for the wagon. He was followed by a Mexican hostler. As Hank dropped the heavy seat Sharon jumped to the ground, saying that the baggage must be rearranged.

Sheriff Gill was out as quickly, but instead of helping with the baggage and the placing of the seat he stood with arms loosely folded, his right hand not far from the six-shooter that hung in its holster at his side.

Kate Fielding's eyes demanded to be told what all this was about. Why should he be so insistent and so mysterious ? Why didn't he want the liveryman to go into the stable ? And why had he not told her last night that he was going on this trip ? Recognizing the queries in her eyes, and interpreting them, at least in part, Gill said :

" I know this is a surprise to you, Kate."

" Well, of course I am a little surprised," she admitted, " but it's a pleasant surprise, Bob."

" It's sort of a surprise to me, too," went on the sheriff. " I didn't know anything about it myself until word came an hour or two ago that Hank and I were likely needed out in the country this side of the Chiquita."

Bob Gill's sudden appearance with the announcement that he was going along was not all that puzzled Kate Fielding. Why was Sharon acting as he was ? Heretofore he had been suave and cordial almost to the point of servility. Now he moved and talked stiffly, as if afraid of something, or very angry.

" All aboard ! " he said, but with joviality that was so patently forced Hank O'Day grinned. Hank clambered to the left side of the rear seat, Gill to the right.

'Why can't I ride back there with you, Bob?" Kate asked, turning. She hoped to get from him later an explanation of his puzzling actions. "We can talk much better about old times as we ride along. Will you change places with me, Mr. O'Day?"

Hank grinned, looked sheepish, and his face reddened.

"If you don't mind, ma'am," he stammered, "it always makes me awful seasick to ride up in the front seat of a rig like this."

Sharon uttered a snort of anger and disgust, jerked about.

"Move over here, O'Day! Change places with Miss Fielding."

"I'm awful sorry, Sharon," Hank insisted, "but I tell you I'll get sicker'n a sick horse if I have to ride that away, and when I get sick like that it ain't—well, it ain't so nice for a lady to see."

"Then you shift to the front, Sheriff!" Sharon ordered. "If Miss Fielding wants to ride back there——"

"I'm doing all right where I am," returned Bob Gill. "And I really think Miss Fielding will be more comfortable there than she would back here."

Frustrated, angry, Sharon turned his attention back to his four horses. Kate, however, did not look in that direction, but at Bob Gill. What in the world was the matter with him? She wanted to ask, to cry out that she thought he was acting queerly, to say the least, but realised that he must have good reason for doing as he was doing. Too, any angry outburst on her part would probably sound childish to him.

They were a mile from town, following a road that wound through a splendid stand of yellow-pine, when she felt the tension relax. Sharon began to talk as if he had never been angered. There was nothing remarkable in Bob Gill's good-natured impassivity. He was often that way. Hank chewed tobacco industriously and spat with much enjoyment at the revolving left rear wheel, except when he occasionally stopped chewing long enough to tell some brief, droll yarn about his experience as a cowboy.

"That was before I gets to be a deputy-sheriff," he explained as he grinned at the interested girl. "Say, if this here sheriff fires me, will you give me a job out at your ranch, Miss Fieldin'?"

"Why of course I will!" Kate promised, laughing. "Bob, why don't you fire him now? I think I would like to have him for one of my riders."

"No, siree!" Hank ejaculated in much surprise. "I don't want no job as a common buckeroo. I done put in too many years at that job already, and my abilities are so durned great I just couldn't be bothered to take no job like that. If I can't be foreman——"

"Then how about being my foreman, Mr. O'Day?" Kate

offered seriously. " I think I would relish taking you away from the sheriff."

Her eyes met Bob's, and there was no amusement in his. He said :

"Well talk about that later, Kate. Right now I need Hank." The next moment he was calling her attention to a towering, snowy mountain at their left.

She was looking at the mountain, and at the ones that joined it, when she became aware that Sharon had suddenly jammed down the brake and jerked the horses to a stop. She flinched towards the outer end of the seat as she saw the driver's right hand dart towards his right side. Then she discovered that a big revolver was in the sheriff's right hand, and that its muzzle was pressed against Sharon's back.

" Don't do it !" the sheriff barked. " That is, unless you want to commit suicide, Sharon, and if you're considering that, remember there's a lady present."

" But, Bob !" the white-faced girl protested. " Bob ! What——"

" Take his hardware, Hank," Sheriff Gill ordered, paying her no attention.

' Hardware ?" she whispered blankly, then quickly understood as she saw the deputy lean forward and relieve Sharon of belt and holstered pistol.

CHAPTER XX

SHARON'S suavity and the flashes of refinement and gentility he had shown were gone now He bared his teeth and snarled as he cursed the sheriff. Whiter of face than before, Kate Fielding shrank away from him.

" Say, what kind of game is this, anyway ?" he growled, looking at the sheriff. ' What do you mean by pulling a gun on me and taking mine, you——"

" That's just what I'm going to find out," returned Gill. " What kind of a game is it ?"

Sharon turned quickly and grabbed the carbine from back of the seat cushion, but as he swept it up Kate Fielding grasped its barrel. She clung to it tenaciously, being dragged this way and that as the horses took fright and began to run.

" Let go of that gun, Sharon !" Gill ordered. " Let go !"

" You go to hell !" Sharon snarled. Then to the girl : " Let go of that, you fool !"

He was about to wrest the gun from her frantic and determined hands when he was cracked across the wrist by the barrel of the sheriff's heavy Colt.

Sharon uttered a howl of pain, and as his hands released the carbine Kate so narrowly missed toppling backward out of the

wagon that Hank O'Day had to jump and reach to save her.

"Here it is, here it is!" she panted, still holding the rifle. "Take it!"

Hank took the carbine, The horses were running, the wagon lurching and careening.

"Grab those lines!" the sheriff commanded.

"Aw, let 'em run!" Sharon sneered, but reached for the slack lines as the end of the six-shooter stabbed at his back once more. Really dexterous with horses, he had the four at walk after fifty yards. As he stopped them he turned in his seat.

"Now," he growled, "I want to know just what this means!"

"What does it mean, Bob?" Kate panted. "Why——"

"It means," returned Gill, "that nothing is going to happen to you on this trip, Kate."

"To me? Why—what did you think was going to happen to me, Bob?"

"You fools!" Sharon said, and laughed sneeringly. "So this is the kind of a sheriff we have out here, is it? A fine kind of a peace officer you are, Gill!"

"It is the kind of sheriff to have, it sure is!" declared Hank O'Day.

Bob Gill said nothing. He realized that he had taken a long chance on little more than intuition and suspicion and a few meagre bits of circumstantial evidence, but he had gone this far and he meant to go on.

"What is it, Bob?" Kate demanded now. "Why did you disarm Mr. Sharon?"

"I think we'll let the immediate future answer that, Kate," he said.

"All right, you drive her out to her ranch if you don't trust me!" Sharon cried out, and wrapped the lines about the whip-socket. "I'll tend to you two when we get back to town!"

He would have leaped angrily from the wagon had it not been for the sheriff's steady gun.

"Stay right where you are!" snapped Gill. "You'll do the driving, and you'll do it the way I tell you!"

Kate, very pale and very wide of eyes, was silent. She saw Sharon unwrap the lines, tighten them.

"Well, where do you want me to go, Gill?" he snarled. "You've got the drop."

"And we expect to keep it," added the sheriff.

Kate looked appealingly at O'Day for some explanation of this strange ride. Hank grimaced and shook his head.

"I don't reckon there'll be much danger from now on, ma'am."

"But—but was there danger, Mr. O'Day?"

"Well, likely there would have been," Hank said, and grimaced again.

"So you two bulls came along to protect the lady, did you?" Sharon sneered. "So that's your game, is it?"

"That's our game," agreed Gill. "Drive on till I tell you where to turn off."

They drove for almost a mile, and turned into a clearing when the sheriff ordered it. Sharon was made to stop the team close to some thick timber at the upper end of the Cienaga.

"Pile out most of the stuff, Hank," ordered Sheriff Gill.

Hank removed the back seat first. Then he began to pile out baggage while the sheriff stood and watched, arms loosely folded, right hand close to pistol. Kate watched, too, though she was more dazed an surprised than before.

"What are you going to do with them?" she demanded. "Bob, I'll need those things!"

As Bob Gill stood guard over Sharon and supervised the unloading of the baggage, he thought of the two strange riders who had left town early yesterday morning, and of Shane's alleged ride to a horse pasture and his return to town.

"But, Bob, I will need those things!" Kate insisted. "Please put them back, O'Day! I order you to put them back!"

Hank grinned at her and said he took his orders from the sheriff.

"Bob, Gill, you tell him to put my luggage back into the wagon!" she cried. "If you don't I'll get out and do it myself! What right have you to do that anyway? I won't endure another moment of this outrageous conduct!"

Still paying no attention, the sheriff ordered O'Day to lift out the steamer trunks but to leave the remainder of the baggage. Kate was actually beginning to climb from her seat when Gill strode round to the rear of the wagon. Without relaxing his watchfulness on Sharon, he blocked her.

"Well!" she cried. "If you won't put my luggage back at least you can explain what all this means! I never saw such a lot of mysterious foolishness in all my life! Do you think I am a mere child?" She tried to meet the Sheriff's calm look with a very angry one.

"Kate," he asked, "have you ever really had excuse to mistrust me?"

"Yes, I have! I mistrust you now!"

The sheriff's eyes did not change, except to become more watchful of the sullen and sneering Sharon.

"Kate," he said gently, "do you honestly mistrust me now?"

"N-no, I don't!" she faltered, and began to cry. "I suppose—I suppose——"

"Your things will be safe here," Gill told her. "They wouldn't be seen in a dozen years from the road yonder We'll pick them up on our way back."

She was sobbing now, and her sobs would have been more prolonged had it not been for her anger. Sharon laid a hand on her arm.

"Don't worry about it, Miss Fielding," he advised. "I'll take care of this whole thing as soon as I get back to Ponderosa."

Though tearful still, she turned upon him indignantly.

"Please keep your hands off me, Mr. Sharon!" she ordered. "I want nobody to touch me, or to sympathize with me until this outrageous business is explained!"

"All right," he sneered, and raised his shoulders in a shrug. "If that's the way you feel about it."

"That's the way I feel about it, sir!" she declared, and tried to quiet her sobs.

In this she was perhaps helped by curiosity, for she saw that Hank O'Day was lining the remaining pieces of her luggage against the side of the wagon.

"Throw in that tarp, Hank," the sheriff instructed.

"Sure, we'll need that," O'Day agreed with a half-chuckle.

Kate was about to call Gill when he came and stood before her. She reached out hands that implored him to explain, but he caught them, then slipped his hands up under her arms, and lifted her to the ground.

"Keep your eye on Sharon, Hank," he said. "I want to talk to Miss Fielding for a few minutes."

Bob Gill could feel her tremble as she clung to his arm while he led the way into the timber. When they reappeared presently there was more calm in her eyes, and resignation too.

"There's a risk to it, Kate." he said. "I want you to understand that."

She replied softly that she did understand. He told her that she could be taken back to town if she wished. She would be safer there.

"No, Bob. I must go on. I must see whether you are right."

Sheriff Gill assisted her to the seat where she had sat before, walked round to where the under-sheriff still guarded Sharon.

"Now," said Gill grimly as he looked at the sneering and sullen liveryman, "we're going on. And I want to warn you that if you make one little move that seems false to me, I'll kill you so dead that this team will run away before Miss Fielding can grasp the lines!"

"Oh!" Kate gasped. Last night Bob Gill had killed a man. Would he have to kill another? Why did men have to be killed?

Sharon did not answer, except with a shrug and another sneer.

"And now," went on the sheriff, "I'd like to know where it is planned to take place."

"What?" Sharon demanded as if he were bewildered. "Where what's planned to take place?"

When the sheriff saw he was to get no satisfactory answer he ordered Hank to climb into the wagon. Hank sat down in the bottom, keeping his six-shooter out of its leather. Gill took the uncomfortable seat beside his deputy. Kate turned and her eyes asked plainly why she could not come back there with them.

"You'll have to stay there, my dear," Gill told her, and as she saw the concern in his eyes some of the fear left hers.

"Get back to the road and keep going, Sharon," Gill ordered.

"Back to town, eh?" Sharon demanded, his tone somewhat hopeful, Kate thought.

"Not back to town. Towards the Chiquita."

Calmer now, but still in the clutch of a fear so great that all her courage and common-sense were required to master it, Kate watched Sharon as he guided the team. His suavity, his civility were gone now, and his poise. He seemed mediocre, tricky, even stupid, a man who could not rise above what he had been, however low that was.

She shrank from him and turned, to be reassured by the smiles of the men behind her. She turned back and tried valiantly to act as if she were not frightened.

Gill and O'Day had decided there would be little danger near town, in fact not within several miles of it. The team was good, and though he was trapped and disarmed, Sharon handled it well. The result was that they were out of the timber by eleven o'clock. Now white-oaks and palosverdes dotted rough grassy hills, from which antelopes took flight, their white flags bobbing. Cattle were numerous.

Almost from Ponderosa it had been a gradually descending road. Now it steepened, became rougher. Within an hour after they had left the pines, Kate forgot her fears and doubts sufficiently to see that a broad, hazy valley lay below and before them.

Beyond it were reddish mesas, tier upon tier, to her worried and troubled brain symbolic of blood and violence. Beyond the red mesas stretched long blackish cliffs, and then the summits of a great mountain range rose in haze against the pale sky, so mysterious and implacable and infinite that they might have been there to symbolize the uncertainty of eternity itself.

Kate uttered a faint cry, turned as she heard the rustling of the stiff tarpaulin. She saw with amazement that O'Day was already hidden under it.

"Don't be worried, Kate," the sheriff said. "After all, you know it's possible for me to be wrong."

She saw him draw up the tarp until it came to his lean waist, saw that his right hand gripped the six-shooter.

" And now, Sharon," he said as if he had forgotten her, " I may be covered up, but I can still watch you ! And don't forget what I told you ! If you make one false move I'll blow the back of your head off ! Savvy ?"

" Yeah, I savvy," Sharon muttered, and drove on, skilfully guiding the trotting team down the rough, crooked grade.

Kate turned on the hard seat, gazed at the two forms under the tarpaulin. She realized that her heart was beating strangely, realized, too, that her fear had left her and that she was able to think more clearly.

" Oh!" she whispered, " I wonder if it will happen !" And realized that she would be disappointed if it did not.

CHAPTER XXI

Kate Fielding believed she would have been terribly stricken but for the look on Sharon's face. It was no longer handsome, but gross and craven. Her sense of humour made it possible for her to appreciate the fact that he was much more frightened than she was.

Far ahead the reddish mesas did not seem so symbolical of blood and violence now, or the hazy mountains of the uncertainty of the eternal. They were only mesas and mountains, rather grand and inspiring to her.

" You seem to be frightened, Mr. Sharon," she said, and not without a little taunt and malice.

He swung about as if she had pricked him with a poison pin.

" Me scared ?" he laughed weakly. " Why should I be ? What is there to be scared about ?"

" I don't really know, Mr. Sharon, unless it is of the officers back there."

" Of them ?" he demanded harshly. " There's nothing to be scared of them about. They just got the drop, and that's all there is to it."

Kate glanced back, but the sheriff ordered her to face ahead.

" Oh, I forgot !" she gasped.

" You forgot what ?" Sharon demanded.

" I forgot to keep admiring that scene yonder," replied the girl. " Isn't it marvellous ? No, that word doesn't do it justice. It's grand, that's what it is, truly grand !"

" You're grand, Kate," Sheriff Gill told her. " But don't look back. If you are blushing I can see it at the back of your neck."

" I'm not blushing !" she denied, then rolled the fur collar higher at the back of her pretty neck as she turned pinker.

" Well ! You and the sheriff must've knowed each other mighty well," Sharon sneered.

" Oh, yes !" Kate agreed. " Sheriff Gill and I have known each other since we were children."

" Then why didn't you tell me about it ?" he growled. " He could have drove you out to your durned ranch."

" Why, I suppose I didn't think of it," she said. " He could have, couldn't he ?"

" He sure could have for all I care !"

Though she knew that in the back of the wagon only the eyes of the officers were visible from under the tarp, Kate wanted much to look back to make certain.

" That hombre ain't scared, is he ?" O'Day whispered. Sheriff Gill grinned but kept silent.

" Say, you reckon may be we been mistaken in this business, Bob ? We come quite a ways."

" Sure, I could be mistaken, Hank," the sheriff whispered, " but I'm still backing my hunch, because it's backed up by a little evidence. We may have to go all the way to the Bar B Bar though."

" Well, that's suit me all right," grinned O'Day. " Didn't the lady ask me to be foreman of that spread for her ? But say, Bob, that pretty boy'll be plumb scared to death before we get that far, and I'll have to drive."

Kate was cold and rigid now, but as they topped each brushy rise and emerged from each brushy ravine she breathed more freely. She managed to smile when she saw Sharon holding the lines with one hand while he rolled and lit a cigarette.

" You aren't used to rolling your own, are you ?" she laughed. " You lost nearly all that tobacco, Mr. Sharon."

" It's this damned wind !" he growled. " It blew nearly all the tobacco away."

The red mesas were considerably nearer now. The air was so warm that Kate felt uncomfortable in the rich fur coat. Down in the flat grey valley spirals of dust were dancing.

" I didn't realize there could be such a change of climate in a few miles, Mr. Sharon," Kate ventured, trying to make conversation.

He did not reply, but stared ahead while he seemed to guide the team mechanically. She thought he looked like a man travelling to his doom. His face was grey now.

" Well, I'm not much better off," she whispered, and laughed weakly. If she were only allowed to look back !

" What you snickerin' about ?" Sharon snarled. " I don't see anything funny !"

Fear and terror fled from Kate Fielding now, and her laugh was real. She said :

" Why, everything is funny, Mr. Sharon. And I think you are the funniest of all."

" Me funny ?" he cried in rage. " What the hell's funny about me ? I sure don't feel funny !"

" Anybody who is frightened out of his wits is funny," the girl returned, chin up, " even though he is to be pitied."

" Don't get the idea I want anybody to pity me !" Sharon sneered.

" That's it, Miss Kate !" Hank O'Day encouraged. " Keep on throwin' the harpoon into him."

Kate started to turn to make reply, but the sheriff warned softly :

" Don't look back, Kate ! Keep on talking, but make the conversation more casual, and point out things on the range once in a while."

Thus ordered to talk, Kate could find nothing to say. Sharon peered ahead, pop-eyed. He looked as if he, too, were incapable of further speech. They jolted from the lower end of a brushy ravine, and the girl saw a small flat, brushy and dotted with huge rocks. To her it looked as if massive boulders had been rolled this way and that to make room for the road. There were no sounds now but the rattle of iron tyres and the clip of shod hoofs and the rustle of wind through the brush.

They were in the middle of the rocky flat when Sharon uttered a profane but shaky word and slammed on the brake while he hauled the four horses almost to their haunches. Kate gasped, but somehow did not feel fright as two masked men appeared, one from each side of the road.

" Hands up !" ordered the shorter of these men gruffly. " Get 'em into the air pronto !"

" Your turn too, lady," commanded the taller, who advanced from the left.

With shaking hands Sharon wrapped the lines about his left leg. He raised his hands into the air, forgetting that here was where he was to do something courageous and heroic but not fatal.

Kate Fielding, however, made no motion to elevate her hands. She gasped as she heard behind her the quick rustle of stiff canvas. Then it erupted, and over the left rear wheel went Hank O'Day, shooting before he hit the ground.

Over the high right wheel went Sheriff Gill, more swiftly and with more agility. His six-shooter roared almost with that of the short bandit. This bandit dropped his weapon from useless fingers. At the other side of the rig the taller bandit had shrunken, collapsed in a heap on the road.

" Hold those horses, Sharon !" Gill barked. " Hold them !"

Sharon grabbed for the lines, hauled the rearing and snorting four to their haunches.

The living bandit jerked the mask from his face with wounded right hand. His amber eyes blazed as they held on the shaking Sharon.

" Say, what sort of trap was this ?" he snarled, and his

ruddy-bearded face writhed. "Why, you tricky, double-crossing——I might have knowed you'd jumped at anything like this if there was a chance for more money in it!" With his unhurt hand he reached for the fallen weapon.

"Stop it!" ordered the sheriff, and kicked the pistol under a horse.

"Oh!" Kate gasped, and pressed her flat hands to her bosom. "Oh, you were right, Bob! You were right!"

"Come on now, spill it!" Sheriff Gill was ordering. "I don't want to have to waste time and trouble prying the story out of you two. What was the game. The whole thing!"

"Game?" sneered Red Kirby. "He told us he had it all ribbed up so we could kidnap the lady yonder and hold her for plenty ransom, Sheriff! The tricky, double-crossing——!"

"But it wasn't my fault, Red!" Sharon protested. "It was this double-crossing, ornery sheriff who spoils the game! I didn't do it!"

"Double-crossing and ornery!" Kate Fielding cried. Her eyes flashed and she was very pale again. "You cowardly scoundrel, Sharon, you know that if it hadn't been for him I'd be in the clutches of you bandits now, and on my way to heaven knows where!"

"It was all arranged where you was to be took, lady," growled Red Kirby. "Say, is the Kid dead yonder?"

"Well, he ain't precisely alive," growled Hank O'Day, and began putting the handcuffs on Sharon.

Kate clambered out and stood shakily, with a front wheel for support while she watched the coolness and dexterity with which Bob Gill bandaged the wounded bandit's hand. She smiled wryly and with real appreciation as she saw handcuffs snapped on Kirby's hairy wrists.

"All right now," said the sheriff. "What's the rest of the story? Who else was implicated in this nice little scheme of yours——"

"Shane was!" blurted Sharon. "He was a professional killer, and he thought he had to take you out of the picture, Sheriff. But you was too quick for him, damn you!"

"Huh?" gasped Kirby, and his amber eyes dilated. "Did Bill Shane get rubbed out?"

"Yeah, he did!" snarled Sharon. "And it was this foxy sheriff that beats him to the draw, and just when Bill was all set to make sure there was goin' to be one less sheriff in this country!"

Sheriff Gill could get no more imformation than this. Sharon and Kirby took refuge behind sullen, derisive silence. Gill did not ask them many more fruitless questions. He turned to the girl.

"Kate," he said, "are you afraid to ride back to Ponderosa with a dead man?"

" With—with a dead man !" she repeated, and thought that with a little different twist of fate it might have been Sheriff Bob Gill who was dead in the road. " But—but aren't you going back to town too, Bob ?"

" Not just now, Kate. I have some other work to do. There is quite a long ride before me. Hank will drive you back, but we'll have to send the dead man and the prisoners along, too."

She looked about, a question in her hazel eyes.

" But where will you get a horse, Bob ?"

" There should be a couple of horses close about," Sheriff Gill replied. He looked at the sullen Kirby. " The other morning I had the luck to see this hombre and his dead amigo yonder riding a couple of broncs out of Ponderosa. Where are they, Kirby ?"

" You find 'em !" snarled the bandit. " It looks to me now like Jim Sharon wasn't in this here game willin'ly, and I sure ain't helpin' no damned sheriff !"

CHAPTER XXII

As SHE watched Sheriff Gill select the highest rock and begin climbing to its top, Kate realized that she would not have thought about doing this under the same circumstances. Yet it seemed the sensible thing to do.

" He's been here in the West long enough to think like an Injun," Hank explained when he noticed the expression on her face. " You see from the top of that there rock he can cover a heap of territory and save himself a lot of walkin'."

" But how does he know there are horses close ?" she inquired.

" Huh ! Hombres like these here don't walk far," returned the under-sheriff.

Kate looked at Kirby, who was now nursing his wounded hand and grimacing with pain.

" They'd be a lot better if they walked or worked," she declared.

In the look the wounded bandit gave her she saw that the brutality was out of his amber eyes.

" Ma'am," he declared, " I sort of believe you are right at that."

" Of course it's right !" she told him. " Where would you be now if you had thought more of work and less of crime ?"

Sharon laughed harshly.

" Best look out, Red. First thing you know she'll be preachin' a sermon to you."

"Well, she's durned right!" declared Kirby. "Take a look at Kid Rigdon there if you don't think she's right."

"Oh, hell!" Sharon sneered. "A man's got to die once anyhow, so what difference does it make when it happens?"

"Well, I sure don't hanker to have it happen to me that way!" grunted Kirby.

It was this ruthless talk of human life that finally caused Kate Fielding to realize the magnitude of her escape from these men. She walked to a rock and sat down, feeling weak and cold. She smiled wanly at the under-sheriff.

"There ain't nothin' more for you to worry about, Miss Kate," O'Day told her.

"I'm not worrying, Hank," she said. "I'm just thinking."

"Good idea," agreed O'Day. "There's two ways to do thinkin'. One's before somethin' like this happens, and the other's after."

Sheriff Gill returned riding a horse and leading another. Though she knew she was in little or no danger, Kate felt safer because of Bob's nearness.

"How about riding back to town, Kate?" Gill asked. "I think this horse is gentle enough."

"Sure," put in Kirby. "That was the Kid's horse. Anybody can ride that bronc."

Kate said ruefully that her riding clothes were far back in the timber.

"I won't mind riding in the wagon," she added, as she looked at the dead man in the road and knew he was to be a fellow-passenger.

"I'm sorry," the sheriff told her, "but there wasn't room for all your bags and us too, the way we wanted to ride, Kate."

"I understand now, Bob."

If he gave her an unusual glance she failed to note it. He began making preparations for the return to Ponderosa.

It was late in the afternoon when Kate Fielding walked wearily into the hotel, the fur coat over her arm, the turban in a hand, her bright hair tousled.

"Why, for goodness' sake, Miss Fieldin'!" Mrs. Owens gasped. "Didn't you get to your ranch?"

Kate explained briefly why she had not gone all the way. She saw the woman pale and start, saw fright fill her black eyes before a look of thanksgiving came into them.

Mrs. Owens could find no suitable words, because in her savage determination to even scores with the sheriff on account of a fancied wrong, she had not so much as suspected Jim Sharon of trickery.

"But where is Sheriff Bob?" she queried, feeling as if she could now wrap her ample arms about his neck and beg his forgiveness. "Didn't he come back with you?"

Kate was still hurt because Bob Gill had refused to tell

her where he was going. He had only smiled and said: "There are some things a sheriff can't tell, Kate. That's one of the disadvantages of the job."

"No, he didn't come back with us, Mrs. Owens," she replied. "May I have the same room, please?"

"Sure, sure!" Henny agreed wonderingly, though she knew it was not often the sheriff confided to other people where he was going when he rode away. "I'll go up with you and make sure you are comfortable. I was so flustered yesterday with—with everything that I forgot to light the fire for you, and it was awful cold, too."

It was towards the end of the third very long day for Kate Fielding when she learned that Bob Gill had returned to Ponderosa. Old Joe McComas, with whom she had become friendly, shuffled into the lobby where she was trying to read. One look at the grisled and weathered face forced the sudden fear from Kate's heart.

"Say, what you reckon's happened, Miss Fieldin'?" old Joe demanded, and his grin spread wider. "That there dog-goned sheriff, he's back!"

"He is?"

"He sure is, ma'am! But that ain't the funniest part of it. Who you reckon he brings with him?"

Kate frowned, shook her head.

"I don't know, Mr. McComas."

As if he must confide his news in her alone, the old man sat down, leaned close. His eyes shone.

"Who'd he fetch back? He fetched back old Buck Blethroad, that's who!"

"Buck Blethroad?" the girl cried. "Buck Blethroad? Why, he's the man I bought the ranch from!"

"He sure is, ma'am!"

"But why did the sheriff bring him back?"

Old Joe was suddenly puzzled and apologetic.

"I sure don't savvy a-tall," he confessed. "Old Buck, he sells out to you and tells us he's goin' down to the coast and live like a white man orter, Miss Kate."

"Yes, I know, but what has that got to do with the sheriff bringing him in? And why did he bring him, Mr. McComas?"

"Durned if I know, ma'am!"

She had to wait more than an hour before Sheriff Gill came. He was as clean as if he had used the hour to bathe and dress, and his expensive suit looked as if it had been tailored for him alone. Kate instantly saw the end of a holster below his coat, and realized that here it did not look unusual for a man to wear a gun.

"I'm very glad you are back," she said as she offered her hand. She drew the hand away, for she failed to get response to the firm, sincere pressure she had given his.

"Well, she ain't half as glad as I am, Sheriff Bob!"

Henrietta Owens declared, and did not utter her ready laugh. "I got a whole lot to explain to you, Sheriff Bob. Want me to do it now?"

Bob Gill gave her a long, steady look. Then he grinned.

"Henny," he drawled, "you haven't a thing to explain to me. You've been my friend, and if you're willing you can keep on being my friend."

A tremble came to her full lips and colour to her cheeks and a mist to her black eyes.

"Thank you, Sheriff Bob," she said, and turning, went back to her counter.

In her room upstairs Kate faced Bob Gill. She tried to keep from her eyes what was in her heart.

"Now I want to know what happened," she said, trying to assume her imperious manner. "Why did you arrest Mr. Blethroad and bring him in? And where did you find him?"

Bob Gill replied that from the time he had first suspected conspiracy against her he had been sure there had been a directing mind behind the whole scheme.

"And who was it?" she prompted.

"Buck Blethroad."

"What? You mean the man I bought my ranch from?"

He nodded, then told her that Blethroad had made a full confession when he had learned of the failure of the diabolical plot he had made.

Avaricious, actually homesick for the ranges where he had lived so ruthlessly and dishonestly, Blethroad had got off the westbound train at Needles to limber his legs and take a last look at the Arizona mountains. It had been there he had met Sharon and Shane. Shane had once ridden for the Bar B Bar, and when Blethroad had recognized him he had been quick to explain the plot that had been forming in his mind.

"And what was that plot, Bob?"

"To kidnap you and hold you for ransom enough for Blethroad to buy back the ranch from you, Kate, and have plenty left to pay the men who were to do the dirty work for him."

"You mean he would have bought back the ranch with the money he was going to make me pay for my liberty?"

"That's the way he tells it," said the sheriff. "Yes, and I'm sure he told the truth for once in his life, Kate."

"Why, the old—the old crook!" she cried.

"He's all of that, and more, Kate. Bill Shane is the man who killed Sheriff Patterson. Yes, it's cleared up. He was riding for the Bar B Bar when Patterson was killed out there. Blethroad confessed that he paid Shane five hundred dollars for the job."

"Job!" she cried. Did they call murder a job out here? Suddenly her lips were trembling, and there was understanding and a plea for forgiveness in her hazel eyes. "Oh, Bob, last night I felt as if you should never be forgiven when you shot a man! Now I understand. Yes, I do understand."

He inclined his tired head, picked up his hat.

"That's about all there is to it, Kate. I thought you would want to know. If I can be of any help to you in the operation of your ranch, you have only to let me know."

"Let you know?" she cried, and caught his hands in hers. "We are going to—that is you are going to run three ranches!"

"Three ranches, Kate?"

"Yes, three ranches! Yours and mine, ours!"

He told her that with his office and his two ranches he would not have time to run hers.

"I'll find you a good reliable range boss, Kate. Maybe I'll even let you have Hank O'Day. He knows cattle."

"I don't want Hank O'Day, Bob!" She clutched his hands more fiercely. "Oh, Bob Gill, you said you would never again ask me to marry you!"

"That's right, Kate."

"Well?"

"And I won't, Kate."

"Of course you won't!" she said impatiently. "But does it make any difference who does the asking? I'm asking you!"

"Why yeah," drawled Sheriff Bob Gill, "it makes a heap of difference." Then with more swiftness than he had shown when he had gone over the rear wheel of the wagon and shot the bandit, he had her in his arms.

"Three ranches!" she laughed presently.

He smiled down into her bright, beautiful face.

"Yes, three ranches, and a sheriff's job. And you, Kate. Quite a handful, isn't it?"

She crept closer into his embrace, lifted her face, smiled.

"Quite an armful, isn't it, Sheriff?"

"Why yeah," he grinned, "it seems to be, but I reckon I can hold it."

THE END

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